ISSN 2633-1004

Autism Parenting Magazine

ISSUE 185

5 Ways to Prevent a Meltdown

Grandparenting in an Autism Family

Building Family Support Systems

Role-Playing Games for Social Skills

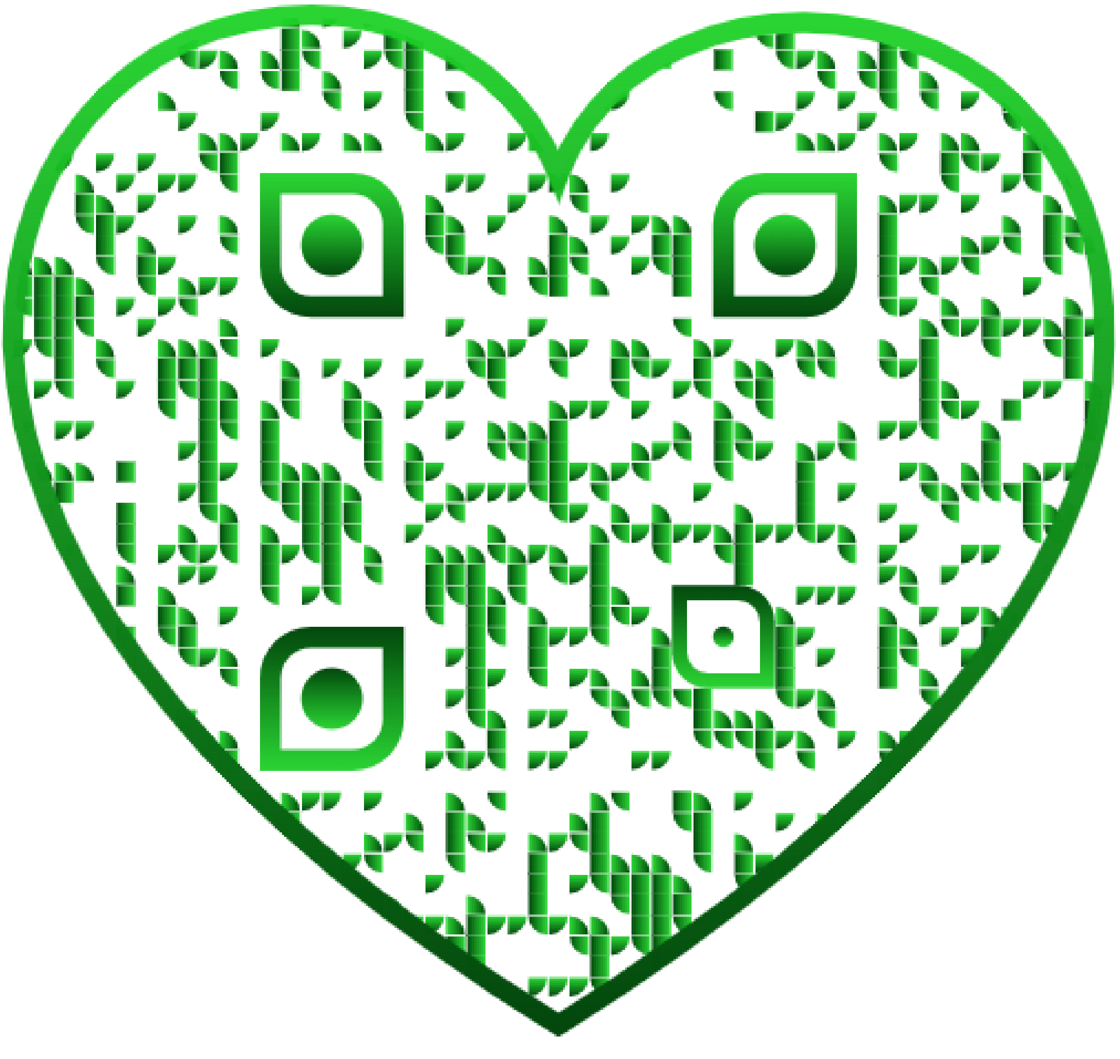
How a School Counselor Can Help

Tips to End Conversations Smoothly

Supporting or Enabling My Autistic Adult?

Stress-Free Santa Visits

HOLIDAY HARMONY AND FAMILY



TEMPLE GRANDIN

An Open Door

Now available on Apple TV & Amazon Prime

BEST DOCUMENTARY
Beaufort International Film Festival
2024

AWARD WINNER
San Diego Movie Awards
2024

AWARD WINNER
Spotlight Documentary Film Awards
2024

AWARD WINNER
Chicago Filmmaker Awards
2023

AWARD WINNER
Las Vegas International Film & Screenwriting Festival
2024

AWARD WINNER
Detroit Independent Film Festival
2024

OFFICIAL SELECTION
Santa Fe Film Festival
2024

OFFICIAL SELECTION
DENVER FILM FESTIVAL
2023

OFFICIAL SELECTION
Utah Film Festival
2024

OFFICIAL SELECTION
DC Independent Film Festival / DCIFF
2024

Editor's Letter

Dear Readers,

Before we gather around the table, the presents, or the tree, we often have an idea of how that will look. We imagine food, festivities, and fun. Yet, sometimes this time of year brings chaos and noise when all is not calm and everything is too bright.

This month's theme is "Holiday Harmony and Family," and depending on your child and family, you might not be looking forward to the surprises lurking around the corner. Will your favorite aunt have comments about your child's picky eating? Will Grandpa find your child's stimming to be odd? Will your close neighbor leave abruptly if your child screams when noise levels heighten or lights become too glaring?

The tips and information in this issue are meant to help you and your child cope with all the merriment and "messyment" of the season. Then, maybe you'll know just what to say to well-meaning family and friends. And hopefully, when the last ember dies, the final carol plays, and the lights have gone dark, you'll all "sleep in heavenly peace."

Happy reading!

Sharon Longo

Editor
Autism Parenting Magazine

CONTENTS

HOLIDAY HARMONY AND FAMILY

7 **CONNECTIONS WITH KAREN: KEEP THE HOLIDAYS CALM AND SIMPLE**
Karen Kaplan, MS

10 **GRANDPARENTING IN AN AUTISM FAMILY**
Carol Vincent, MBA, BA, BS RN

14 **BUILDING FAMILY SUPPORT SYSTEMS**
Dr. Danny L. McGuire, Jr., MA, MPA, MS, PCC

17 BEHAVIOR **5 WAYS TO PREVENT A MELTDOWN**
Kayla Paquette, MEd, BCBA, LABA, CATP

21 **Q&A WITH DR. TEMPLE GRANDIN**
Temple Grandin, PhD

23 SOCIAL SKILLS **TEACHING SOCIAL SKILLS WITH ROLE-PLAYING GAMES**
Carol Tatom, BA.HSE, CHW

27 **SUCCESS STORY – MUSIC IS HIS VOICE**
Bozena Gasior

30 COMMUNICATION **ENDING CONVERSATIONS: TIPS FOR A SMOOTH EXIT**
Marci Melzer, MEd-SLP

34 **STRESS-FREE SANTA VISITS**
Cory Morrison

37 EDUCATION **HOW CAN THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR SUPPORT MY CHILD?**
Dr. Ronald I. Malcolm, EdD

41 **CHRISTMAS STRESS WITH AUTISM**
Alex Manners

44 **ADVERTORIAL BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND CONNECTION THROUGH SAFER TECH**
Bark

48 **ASK DR. MALCOLM**
Ronald I. Malcolm, EdD

51 TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD
THE FINE LINE BETWEEN SUPPORTING AND ENABLING
Kristi Jacobsen

55 **AUTISM WARRIOR – I HAVE A VOICE AND DESERVE TO BE HEARD**
Lindsey Moreland

57 **WHAT'S NEW ON THE BOOKSHELF? – ANDY'S NATURE**
Andrew Tait

58 **WHAT'S NEW ON THE BOOKSHELF? – HELLO SATURDAY!**
Katherine Zoratti

59 **WHAT'S NEW ON THE BOOKSHELF? – THE JOURNEY: EMBRACING THE EXTRAORDINARY**
Sandi Shaner

60 **WHAT'S NEW ON THE BOOKSHELF? – NOAH'S BIG PROBLEM: A HEARTWARMING STORY OF SIBLING BONDING AND NEURODIVERSITY**
Anthony Antoniou

An award-winning publication on a mission to improve the quality of life for families impacted by autism worldwide.

Founder:
Mark Blakey

Editor:
Sharon Longo

Advertising:
Ian Porter

Customer Support:
Joana Durante

Graphic Design:
Nebojsa Dolovacki, Natasha Dolovacki

CONTACT:

Editorial:
editor@autismparentingmagazine.com

Advertising:
advertising@autismparentingmagazine.com

Customer Support:
support@autismparentingmagazine.com

Disclaimer: Autism Parenting Magazine tries to deliver honest, unbiased reviews, resources, and advice, but please note that due to the variety of capabilities of people on the spectrum, information cannot be guaranteed by the magazine or its writers. Medical content, including but not limited to text, graphics, images, and other material contained within, is never intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of a physician with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition, and never disregard professional medical advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have read within.

MODERN DAY

STORYTELLING

Unleash Your Imagination

burble
creativity

What is the
Burble Story Tent?

Our Story Tent provides an immersive storytelling experience designed to engage your child’s imagination, calm sensitivities, and help them settle into a deep, restful sleep.

Get in touch:

www.BurbleCreativity.com

+1(951) 704-6792

info@burblecreativity.com

> *“My 14-year-old Autistic son LOVED the experience - he is still talking about it! He typically has difficulty regulating and winding down each night. However, the night he attended the Storytelling Experience he was calmer than usual and able to fall asleep earlier and slept through the night. That NEVER happens. EVER.”* - Julie P.

AUTISM FOCUSED **ENGAGES THE MIND** **UNLOCKS IMAGINATION**

Connections With Karen: Keep the Holidays Calm and Simple

By **Karen Kaplan, MS**

Here are some strategies to keep the holidays stress-free.

The holidays can be overwhelming, especially for those on the spectrum. Events occur unexpectedly, with too many expectations, sights, and sounds all at once.

I encourage families to keep it simple, while teachers should consider how school celebrations can create tension, anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed.

There are ways to make the events calmer.

Reducing holiday sensitivities

It is possible to reduce holiday sensitivities without avoiding them altogether.

Working together, we can highlight the positives that holidays can bring. We can develop strategies to help individuals on the spectrum join family and friends during these special times.

Consider these simple strategies to keep the holidays more engaging:

Social Stories™

Using social stories can help prepare individuals for upcoming holidays. Help them see what the holiday could look like, making it easier for them to ease into it.

Calendars and schedules

Mark off holidays on the individual's calendar so they can see time passing and anticipate the upcoming holiday.

Create a holiday activity daily schedule so they can review the event before and on the special day. Have them look at it and explain what will happen and when.

Prepare for the holiday together

Engage them in holiday preparation, including making food, sending out cards, and decorating. Add decorations to your home or classroom gradually.

Prepare for unwrapping presents by having your child or adult help wrap them beforehand. Some individuals may have challenges with fine motor and motor planning skills, so model and practice with them.

Let them know who will be visiting and when. Show them the person's picture before they arrive (friend, grandparent, cousin, neighbor).

Visiting others

If they must travel to a family's or neighbor's home, prepare your individual ahead of time. Make sure they have the schedule of events with them for the day.

See if the hosts can send pictures of their home, and use the Social Story™ technique as well.

> “As a community, we can support parents of individuals who live on the spectrum by seeking to learn more about this neurodiversity and offering understanding.”

Ensure they are aware of who will be at the home you are visiting.

Eating issues

If eating with others is challenging, let the hosts know that your child may not be interested in eating in front of others. Reassure the hosts that this is okay.

Allow your child or teen to leave the room, ensuring they have a quiet space to retreat to for these times.

You can also take their special foods to these gatherings.

Sensory sensitivities

If noise levels become an issue, using some earplugs can help. Allowing them to wear a cap inside can also help divert some of the brightness.

Ensure they wear comfortable clothing and carry a transitional or comfort object that helps them feel calm.

Ask the host family or neighbor to identify a quiet, safe place in the house where your individual can retreat to and play a game on their phone or computer.

Create a music playlist for them to listen to that helps calm them.

Have an exit plan for when things become overwhelming, and let your individual know to ask for help. Let the hosts know you might need to take a walk or leave a bit earlier than others.

Today, we are seeing more sensory-friendly Santa visits and movie events. Look into these in your community and attend those during the holidays.

Receiving gifts

Teach your individual what to do or say after someone gives them a gift. At times, they might not like or understand the gift given. Explain that it is polite to thank the giver. Putting a little smile on their face helps too.

Helping to make the holidays positive

As a community, we can support parents of individuals who live on the spectrum by seeking to learn more about this neurodiversity and offering understanding.

We can assure parents and caregivers that, regardless of the different behaviors we may see, we will still be there for them.

We can help make the holidays more positive by continuing to include families with children and adults on the autism spectrum in our events and finding ways to accommodate their differences.

Resources:

Carol Gray Social Stories. https://carolgraysocialstories.com/

Hammer, C. (2017). Autism parenting: how to have a happy holiday with a child on the spectrum. Amazon Digital Services. https://www.amazon.com/Autism-Parenting-Happy-Holiday-Spectrum-ebook/dp/B0773VF3BJ/

Huston, C. L. (2023). James celebrates Christmas. Independently published. https://www.amazon.com/James-Celebrates-Christmas-Autism/dp/B0CQM5R9BH/

Huston, C. L. (2014). James celebrates Halloween (James Autism series). Independently published. https://www.amazon.com/James-Celebrates-Halloween-Carolyn-Huston/dp/150025276X/

Sensitive Santa. https://www.sensitivesanta.org/

Karen Kaplan, MS, has served as an instructor in the Autism Spectrum Certificate program at Alliant International University and credentialing programs at UC Davis and Sacramento State. She completed her BS and MS in speech pathology at Arizona State University. She minored in special education and holds an Educational Administrative Credential and a Moderate to Severe Teaching Credential. She has sat on nonprofit boards to help build capacity for those with special needs. She started the first elementary and secondary public school programs for autism and founded and directed her own residential school for 20 years in Sacramento. Karen also directed schools for students on the spectrum in the San Francisco North Bay Area and the San Francisco South Bay Area for 15 years. She is an author and speaker and has spent time globally helping non-governmental agencies in Indonesia and Africa. Currently, she is consulting with families, schools, and adult programs.

🌐 www.karenkaplanasd.com

✉ karensupportsu@comcast.net

in www.linkedin.com/in/karen-kaplan-51104aa

Grandparenting in an Autism Family

By **Carol Vincent, MBA, BA, BS RN**

Grandparents can provide connection and support for parents.

Learning that you are going to be a grandparent is one of the most exciting experiences in life. Long before the baby is born, we anticipate, plan, and dream about who they will be and our relationship with them.

We can hardly contain ourselves when we finally meet the little bundle of joy.

The months go by, your grandbaby is meeting milestones, and you couldn't be happier in your grandparent role. Yet, after their first birthday, you notice some concerning behaviors.

Grandparents may recognize autism first

Many grandparents report knowing, before the official diagnosis, that their grandchild is on the autism spectrum. Having already raised children, grandparents are frequently the first to recognize unmet milestones, unusual behaviors, developmental delays, and regressions.

One of the first boundaries we may encounter as autism grandparents is whether or not to share our suspicions with the parents. This decision can be very complicated, depending on the previous relationship between the parents and grandparents, as well as the parents' readiness to hear their concerns.

Interestingly, the maternal grandmother is most often the grandparent who suspects something isn't quite right. While I am not the maternal grandmother, I did suspect autism.

Before my grandson was two years old, he knew all his letters, the sounds they made, and all his numbers. His favorite toys contained letters and numbers. The only book he ever wanted to read was Chicka Chicka Boom Boom.

He also showed no interest in social interactions, lined up his toys, and ran back and forth across the room. While I knew very little about autism, I did recognize this hyperfocus as a characteristic. I did not share my concerns with his parents, but they soon realized.

Grandparents are a source of support

There are approximately four million autism grandparents in the United States. A 2021 study showed that most grandparents care immensely for their grandchildren and want to be actively involved in their lives, both now and in the future.

Grandparents are a source of unconditional love and will try to ensure the best possible life for their grandchildren.

Grandparents can also provide tremendous support to their adult children. Depending on the family's needs and the grandparents' resources, this can take many forms.

Grandparent types

There are several types of grandparents, with no one type being better than another.

Traditional

They believe that the parents make decisions, and they don't want to interfere. They prefer to visit, bring presents, and tend to be more formal.

Spare-parent

They live nearby and are very involved in the family's life. They help as much as possible, but also have their own lives.

Embedded

They live with the extended family under the same roof, act as a third parent, and are involved in decision-making.

Fun

They enjoy being active, playing, and spending time with the grandchildren, which allows the parents to enjoy their liveliness.

Long-distance

They live far away and visit once or twice per year. Geographical distance does not mean emotional distance.

Primary-care

They are actively raising their grandchildren and have full or partial custody of them.

Our grandchildren don't need perfect grandparents; they need loving grandparents.

How can grandparents help?

The only way to know how best to be of service is to ask. Our adult children need us, and we can make life better for their whole family.

Although they may not always be able to articulate their needs, we should avoid making judgments and suggestions unless such input is requested.

The most important thing we, autism grandparents, can do is be a source of support and encouragement.

While educating ourselves about autism is very important, we must remember that we are not the parents and can only understand, second-hand, the challenges they face daily. Although knowledge is power, there is a boundary that we grandparents need to respect.

Our adult children do not need to be told how to handle their child based on something we read in a book. I mention this because it was a mistake I made in the early days after my older grandson's diagnosis.

Although my son understood that my intention was not to be critical, he was overwhelmed and was doing his best to navigate this new journey. Thankfully, we were able to have an open and honest conversation and move past it.

Now, I try to listen and offer encouragement to him for the amazing job he is doing as a single father of two boys on the autism spectrum. Communication with the parents is critical to better understanding their needs.

Grandparents also need support

As grandparents, we love all of our grandchildren equally, but those on the spectrum tug at our heartstrings in a different way. We may need to learn new ways to show love and build connections.

A survey showed that grandparents worry about the future of their autistic grandchild(ren). Will they be able to live independently? Will they finish school and hold a job? Will they have meaningful relationships? Will they be happy?

These and many other concerns are associated with various feelings, so grandparents also need support. It is important to have fellowship with other grandparents of children with autism who truly understand.

When my older grandson was newly diagnosed, I needed to have a place where I could share my feelings openly and honestly. I created an online support group specifically for grandparents.

The group has grown to nearly 1100 members worldwide and has proven to be a tremendous source of support.

Final thoughts for the journey

Here are a few key takeaways if you are a grandparent:

- Remember that grandparents are an important part of the village.
- Know that every autistic child is unique and special in their own way.
- Offer support for your adult child while not overstepping boundaries.
- Find ways to connect with your grandchild that they appreciate.
- Educate yourself.
- Seek support and community.

It is always good to know you are not alone on this journey.

References:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2025, May 27). Data and statistics on autism spectrum disorder. https://www.cdc.gov/autism/data-research/index.html

Matthews, K., & Bryan, J. (2021). National autism grandparents survey executive summary. Autism Grandparents Club. https://www.autismgrandparentsclub.com/_files/ugd/c3cf0c_a414de01c9694c86b154bbdd4cbc6e95.pdf

Carol Vincent, MBA, BA, BS RN, is a semi-retired registered nurse who has spent most of her career in Women's Health. She holds a BA in Psychology, a BS in Nursing, and a Master's in Business Administration. While her career has been very satisfying and rewarding, she considers her greatest achievements to be the four children she raised and her eight grandchildren.

Carol thoroughly enjoys time with her family and stays involved in their lives. After two of her grandsons (brothers) were diagnosed with autism, Carol dug right in to learn everything she could about it. She plays a very active role in their lives and connects with each one in a special way. She is grateful for all they have brought to her life.

Her compassion and passion led her to establish a Facebook support group exclusively for grandparents called Grandparents of Children on the Autism Spectrum. The group has grown to over 1100 members from all over the world. Carol holds bimonthly Zoom meetings so members can get to know one another better. She also assumed the role of Coordinator for the Autism Grandparents Club, a free online club providing information to grandparents.

Developing Empathy & Emotional Awareness Through Fun Cooperative Play

EMPOWER EMPATHY
Award-Winning Therapist-Approved Toolkit & Board Game for Autism Families
Weekly Empathy Exercise

www.EmpowerEmpathyGame.com

- **Award-Winning Therapist-Approved Toolkit**
  Empower autism families with tools trusted by professionals.
- **Stress-Free Autism Parenting**
  Tackle challenges & build connections with our **CBT-inspired board game**.
- **Cultivate Cognitive Flexibility**
  Help neurodivergent kids thrive through **perspective-switching activities**.
- **Build Social & Problem-Solving Skills**
  Sharpen **communication, social, and critical thinking** abilities.
- **Master Non-Verbal Cues**
  Boost emotional intelligence with **facial mimicry and non-verbal play**.
- **Real-World Learning**
  Connect essential life skills daily with our **evidence-based guidebook**.

tyny Sprouts

INSTA-CALM

Mimbleballs are plush, round sensory tools that provide effortless connection and immediate emotional relief for the struggles that sometimes accompany ASD and SPD. Their soft hair provides naturally calming comfort, and their wide-set eyes make them safe and reliable companions during stressful situations. Mimbleballs come in two squeezable, giggle-inducing sizes: 5"and 3.5".

Save 10% with code MBASD
www.mimbleball.com

WEIGHTED PURPLE & RAINBOW VANESSA LOVES TO SHARE EXTRA SENSORY COMFORT!

Building Family Support Systems

By **Dr. Danny L. McGuire, Jr., MA, MPA, MS, PCC**

Here are tips for finding support through community and extended family.

When raising a child or caring for an adult with autism, it's easy to feel isolated, like you're carrying the weight of the world alone. Yet, something powerful happens when we connect with others on a similar journey.

Whether we attend a local support group or seminar, or have a conversation over coffee, we begin to realize we're not alone.

Sometimes, we might discover that our stories can help someone else feel seen, heard, and supported.

The power of shared experience

Sharing our challenges can open unexpected doors. I've spoken to classes, small groups, and caregivers, and almost every time, someone approaches me afterward to discuss the topic personally.

That connection matters. You never know when the information you share will help someone else and give them strength.

Parents can find information through webinars, workshops, and parent groups. These safe spaces provide connections with others who are going through the same journey. They help caregivers realize they are not alone in this.

The importance of support and respite

Having access to ABA, speech, and occupational therapy can help children with autism improve in some developmental areas. However, don't forget to also take care of yourself.

Respite care for your individual is a necessity that can provide you with an hour to take a breath or an afternoon to rest. Allowing yourself that time makes you a better caregiver.

Support groups are gold. I have found comfort not only in organized groups, but in simple, informal get-togethers.

Don't worry if your house isn't spotless. Invite someone over to share a cup of tea or some dessert. The purpose is to gain connection.

Help from community resources

Often, resources are right around the corner; you just have to know where to look. A quick internet search for local autism organizations might surprise you. These groups can help with everything from therapy referrals to long-term planning.

The truth is, some families are so overwhelmed, they don't have time to search online or make a phone call. Sometimes, the emotional toll is so high that when they finally get a break, they just collapse from exhaustion. That's real. That's valid.

Plan now for the future

When your child is still young, the idea of long-term planning can feel overwhelming or far-off. However, starting early to plan for your child's future is essential.

I became my son Danny's legal guardian when he turned 18. I also began exploring residential and support options. Some of these places have waitlists of 10 to 15 years.

Financial planning is another critical step. Learn about special needs trusts, ABLE accounts, and long-term care options.

The earlier you educate yourself, the more empowered you'll feel, but don't do it alone. Build a support network that includes extended family, professionals, and trusted friends.

Communication with extended family

One of the biggest challenges families face is a lack of understanding from extended family. Sometimes it's unspoken or subtle. Sometimes it's just plain painful.

If you're an extended family member, such as a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or cousin, your role matters more than you know. Open and compassionate communication is the foundation of support.

Ask how you can help

Ask how things are going. Ask what is needed. Most importantly, listen without judgment.

Don't assume a vacation or gift is the best help. One parent shared that her child with autism loved sitting outside on their worn-down patio furniture. A family-funded vacation would have created more stress than joy. What she needed was a new patio set. Ask. Don't guess.

Offer help and mean it

Offer practical help, such as babysitting, carpooling, or mowing the lawn. Be proactive; don't wait to be asked.

Caregivers often don't want to seem needy, so they don't ask for help. Extend the offer genuinely and without expectation.

Even if you live out of state, you can give a call. Asking "How are you holding up?" might open the door to a conversation someone desperately needed.

Education is empathy in action

One of the most powerful things the extended family can do is become educated. Attend a webinar. Read an article. Sit in on a seminar.

Learn about the challenges parents face, including managing behavior, scheduling therapy, navigating transitions, and planning for long-term care.

Many still believe autism gets "easier" as children grow, but that's a misconception. My son is now a 24-year-old man. He has a beard and watches Elmo.

His tantrums haven't disappeared, but they have changed. They're harder. A 200-pound adult with a meltdown requires a different kind of support than a toddler.

Once others realize that reality, they can become a caregiver's ally.

> One of the biggest challenges families face is a lack of understanding from extended family. Sometimes it's unspoken or subtle. Sometimes it's just plain painful.

Keep the commitment

Support needs to be consistent, not just at the start. This is a lifelong journey. Families need to know they can count on others for the long haul.

That might mean participating in care planning, offering financial support, or just being present. Every bit helps.

Stop by for a cup of coffee or offer to sit with the child so the parent can take a shower in peace. Even small gestures can be meaningful.

Look through the windshield, not the rearview mirror

One metaphor I like to use is when we drive, we look through the windshield because it's big. We're focused on where we're going.

The rearview mirror is small, reminding us of where we've been. If we focus too much on the past and how or why something happened, we crash.

With empathy and support from others, we can look to the future and move forward together.

Dr. Danny L. McGuire, Jr., MA, MPA, MS, PCC, is a former board member of the Autism Society of Illinois and the father of an adult son with autism, diagnosed at age two. Danny is currently the Executive Director of a collegiate Public Service Institute. With over 35 years of public service experience, he holds degrees in law enforcement management, counseling psychology, public administration, foods and nutrition, and ethical leadership. Danny is a credentialed coach by the International Coaches Federation with several areas of specialization. You can contact him at danny@crosstownwellness.com.

5 Ways to Prevent a Meltdown

By **Kayla Paquette, MEd, BCBA, LABA, CATP**

Here are some research-based ways to help a child before they have a meltdown.

You're in the grocery store. Your child suddenly has a meltdown. People stare. Then come the comments: "Control your kid." You're so overwhelmed and embarrassed that you leave without your groceries.

It's tough, and you are not alone.

Managing challenging behavior is like preventing a wildfire. It's much easier to put out a tiny spark than to try to stop a raging forest fire.

The same goes for tantrums and meltdowns; it's far easier to prevent them with small, proactive steps than to calm things down once emotions are out of control.

Here are five simple strategies to help prevent a meltdown before it starts:

Give choices

When possible, offer your child choices to help prevent power struggles and reduce frustration. Choices give kids a sense of control, making them less likely to act out.

These options can be simple and fun:

- "Do you want to brush your teeth before or after your bath?"
- "Do you want to tiptoe to bed or hop like a bunny?"
- "Do you want to buckle your seatbelt, or should I help you?"

The goal remains to complete the task, but allowing some flexibility in how it gets done can make a big difference in cooperation.

Catch them being good

Behavior that gets attention is more likely to happen again, whether that attention is positive or negative.

For example, your child might want to read a book with you, but you're busy cooking dinner. To get your attention, he hits his sister, and now you're focused on him.

Even though it's negative attention, it still encourages your child to repeat the behavior in the future to get your attention.

But what if you caught him before the hitting happened? If you say, "I see how you're waiting. You're doing a great job being patient!" you're giving the attention he's seeking in a positive, encouraging way.

This can help prevent the need for acting out altogether. When kids learn that positive behaviors get them noticed, they're more likely to use those behaviors again in the future.

Here are some simple examples of how to "catch them being good":

- "I love how you used your words."
- "I saw how hard it was to share your toy. You were such a good friend for sharing, even though it wasn't easy."
- "You did a great job cleaning up after yourself."

When you highlight the small wins—the effort, not just the outcome—you're teaching your child what behaviors get your attention in a positive way.

Teach functional communication

It's easy to forget that all behavior is a form of communication, even tantrums and other unwanted behaviors.

When kids can't express what they want or need, they may resort to other ways of letting you know, such as crying, hitting, or having a meltdown.

These behaviors aren't "bad"; they're often signs that the child is trying to communicate the only way they know how.

Speaking isn't the only way children can functionally communicate. Many children with autism use alternative communication methods, such as American Sign Language (ASL) or an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device.

What matters most is that the child has a way to get their needs met.

Teaching a few core words can help reduce frustration and challenging behavior. Here are some of the most powerful early communication words to teach:

- Help
- All done
- More
- Bathroom
- Food
- Water

Optional additions are:

- Stop
- Go
- Yes
- No
- I want

These words can be used across many situations.

When a child learns that they can communicate to get their needs met, they're less likely to rely on behavior that's misunderstood or labeled as "challenging."

Use "first–then" language

Children with autism thrive when they understand what's happening now and what to expect next.

One helpful tool is using "First-Then" language. You present a less preferred task first, followed by a highly preferred activity, so your child knows something motivating is coming next.

For example, you might be trying to get your child to the park to burn off some energy. Just getting shoes on turns into a power struggle. Instead of saying, "Put your shoes on," try: "First shoes, then park."

The key is to keep the instructions short and clear. It reduces confusion and helps your child connect the task with the fun that follows.

Some children benefit even more when this language is paired with a visual aid. A simple First-Then board can use pictures or words (depending on your child's needs) to make the expectation even more concrete.

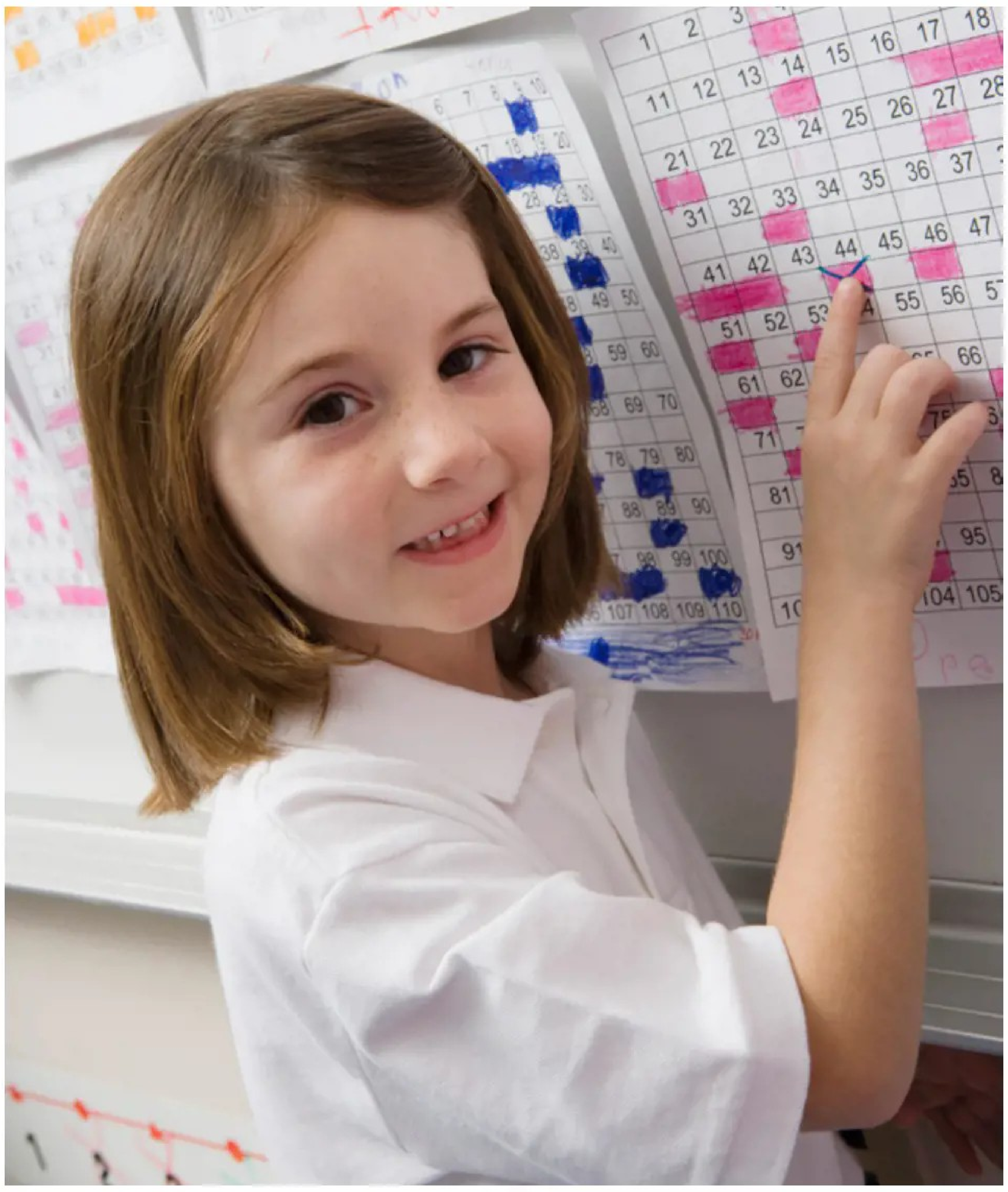
Establish a predictable routine with visual schedules

Children with autism also benefit from predictable routines. When they know what to expect, transitions can feel less overwhelming and more manageable.

Pairing a routine with a visual schedule can be especially helpful. This might be a simple checklist, a row of pictures, or a written schedule—whatever fits your child's age and learning style.

Seeing what's coming next provides structure and can ease anxiety throughout the day.

Having a clear plan helps reduce the stress of unexpected changes, supports smoother transitions between activities, and ultimately reduces the likelihood of a meltdown or other challenging behaviors.



Simple strategies make a big difference

You don't have to be a professional to use these strategies. Try one at a time and see what works best for your child. Even small changes can make a big difference over time.

Remember, progress, not perfection, is the goal.

Being a parent isn't easy, and you're doing an incredible job by showing up, learning, and trying new tools to support your child.

With consistency, patience, and a little preparation, you can help prevent meltdowns before they start. You've got this!

References:

Cooper, J. O., Heron, T. E., & Heward, W. L. (2019). Applied Behavior Analysis (3rd ed.). Pearson. https://www.amazon.com/Applied-Behavior-Analysis-John-Cooper/dp/0134752554

Kayla Paquette, MEd, BCBA, LABA, CATP, is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst, Certified Autism Travel Professional, and the founder of a behavioral company providing ABA and autism travel consulting services to help families navigate both everyday challenges and new experiences. Kayla works directly with children, families, and schools, offering both in-person and remote support. With personal and professional experience supporting individuals with autism, she is committed to creating inclusive and accepting environments where neurodivergent individuals and their families can thrive.

HOLIDAY GIFT

Stories that understand, empower, and inspire every child.

Autism: A NEW SCHOOL YEAR
Overcoming Anxiety, Embracing Change, and New Beginnings
Autism: CONFIDENCE Starts Here
Building Self-esteem and Resilience for Autistic Kids
Autism: CALMING the Chaos!
Strategies for Understanding and Supporting Meltdowns
Autism: MY INVISIBLE Backpack
PARTY TIME for Adrián!
Making Friends, One by One.

Each book in our collection helps children navigate emotions, embrace their strengths, and feel truly seen.

Shop Now on Amazon - Perfect Holiday Gifts!

LovingPiecesBooks.com

Q&A With Dr. Temple Grandin

This month, Dr. Temple Grandin answers parents' questions about nonverbal children and sleep, toileting, and focusing.

Q Jeff of Swanage, UK, asks: "My six-year-old granddaughter is nonverbal autistic. She goes to sleep well but wakes up early in the morning and is awake for some time. She has a nine-year-old brother with whom she shares a room, and he is not autistic, but is also affected.

"Is there anything that can help her sleep through the night, as my daughter and partner both work, and it is so hard for them?"

A Sometimes melatonin can help some kids. (Always consult your child's doctor before administering any supplement.) Getting plenty of exercise can also be helpful. My mother would say, "Go outside to run the energy out!"

When we visited a family friend, there was a hallway where I could run up and down and get out all my energy.

Waking up at night is an autistic trait for some, and the way my mother handled it was that I could read in bed with the reading light on, but I couldn't run around and make noise.

Try creating a quiet nighttime routine. If she wakes up, maybe allow reading, but no noisy play. Reading is helpful for relaxing a little bit.

Q Richard of the Philippines asks: "How do you toilet train a nonverbal 5-year-old?"

A He's still relatively young. One of the things you need to do is be careful how you discuss this. Are you going to teach the task? They have to see somebody demonstrate it.

Let's say you want to teach a child to put on a shoe. Somebody has to demonstrate putting on the shoe. It's the same thing for toilet training.

Let's start with peeing. A person of the correct sex must demonstrate it, and the entire task has to be shown. They can't show bits and pieces of it.

Like putting on a shoe, they have to watch the whole task; otherwise, they might not understand what they're supposed to do. Usually, peeing is easier to teach than pooping.

Model the behavior clearly from beginning to end so they understand what to do.

Q Craig of London, England, asks: "How can I help my 9-year-old nonverbal son? He struggles to focus for any length of time."

A Being unable to focus is a problem for many of these children. Sometimes, you might get help from an occupational therapist (OT) with sensory integration therapy, which involves a lot of swinging and balancing activities. This type of therapy can be beneficial and is evidence-based.

Try having him sit on an exercise ball, which can be helpful because when he's studying, he has to balance. Sometimes, swinging activities can be calming and helpful.

Another simple thing you can try is nailing a board to the floor and having them walk the "tightrope." However, there's no safety hazard since you're doing it on the floor. Sometimes those things can be helpful.

Also, be sure to get plenty of exercise.

I have a book called The Way I See It, in which I discuss these topics related to autism and adolescence. I mention sensory sensitivities, but sometimes those strategies help with concentration.

Many of these kids are extremely picky eaters and eat only a few foods. I'm very concerned about them getting the old-fashioned vitamin deficiency diseases.

Last year, one young man came down with scurvy, which is a Vitamin C deficiency, because he ate such a limited diet. The doctor did not recognize that and said it was just autism.

This kid had scurvy, and I was the one who figured it out. I looked up the symptoms, and then we reviewed his diet and checked the recommended daily allowance of Vitamin C. He was getting about half of what it should be.

If you're growing on the growth chart, they just figure everything's fine. However, there may be some deficiencies with a limited diet. You could have a protein deficiency. So, they need to take a multivitamin to prevent those other, old-fashioned diseases.

One way to help overcome picky eating is to let the child play with food in the kitchen. Just let them put their hands in it. Get them involved in food preparation and cooking.

You can do this at a very young age. Make sure you do it safely. For example, you won't let a three-year-old near the stove, but the child can get involved mixing something up. Then you gradually broaden the palette.

So again, try sensory integration activities such as swinging, balancing, or sitting on an exercise ball. Occupational therapy focused on sensory input may improve attention. Also, exercise and a well-balanced diet are essential, and be sure to monitor for vitamin deficiencies in picky eaters.

Temple Grandin, PhD, is a Distinguished Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University. Many companies around the world use facilities she has designed for handling livestock. She has also been instrumental in implementing animal welfare auditing programs used by McDonald's, Wendy's, Whole Foods, and other corporations. Temple has appeared on numerous TV shows, such as 20/20 and Prime Time. Her books include Thinking in Pictures, Livestock Handling and Transport, and The Autistic Brain. Her books, Animals in Translation and Visual Thinking, have been on the New York Times Bestseller List. Temple was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in September 2017. In 2022, she was named a Colorado State University Distinguished Professor, and in 2023, she was inducted into the Colorado Authors' Hall of Fame.

Teaching Social Skills with Role-Playing Games

By **Carol Tatom, BA.HSE, CHW**

Role-playing games can teach social skills in a fun, low-pressure way.

As parents, the quest to help our autistic children navigate the complex world of friendships can feel particularly challenging.

We want them to feel a sense of belonging and build meaningful connections, but we know that traditional social settings can sometimes be overwhelming and cause anxiety.

We often look for structured, low-pressure environments where they can practice social skills and feel safe being themselves without the added anxiety of the unknown.

The key to unlocking these skills might be found, not in a self-help book, but in a world of fantasy! I'm talking about tabletop role-playing games (RPGs), like the classic Dungeons & Dragons (D&D).

These games are popular in neurodivergent communities because they provide a safe and structured space where individuals can practice social skills in a fun, rather than chore-like, way.

Friendship skills in role play

Think about the basic mechanics of an RPG. You and your friends form a group, ready for an adventure with a shared goal. This simple premise naturally fosters a range of social skills.

- **Turn-taking:** In D&D, there's a clear order or "initiative" during chaotic moments. This makes it clear when it's your child's turn to speak and act, eliminating the guesswork and anxiety that can come with open-ended conversations.
- **Active listening:** To succeed, players must listen carefully to the game's storyteller descriptions and to their friends' plans. This isn't just listening to respond; it's listening to understand the story and their role within it.
- **Empathy and perspective-taking:** A player must consider the entire party's feelings and plans, not just their own. They learn to compromise and work toward a common goal, seeing the situation from multiple viewpoints.

- **Handling mistakes:** A failed dice roll can have a hilarious or frustrating outcome, but rather than a social failure, it's a structured part of the game. This offers a low-stakes environment for practicing emotional regulation, rebounding from disappointment, and accepting that mistakes are part of the adventure.

The learning is indirect, which makes it so powerful. Your child isn't thinking, "I'm practicing compromise right now." They're thinking, "I need to convince my friend to use their magic sword to help us."

The skills are acquired through play and joy, not through a lecture on social etiquette or societal expectations.

A safe space for self-expression

One of the greatest benefits of these games is the ability to play as a character. When a child plays as a brave knight or a wise wizard, they're permitted to try on a new personality.

This fictional distance reduces the anxiety that often accompanies social situations. It takes the pressure off being themselves and allows them to experiment with social behaviors in a safe context.

This space allows a child to try new things. A quiet child might have the role of a loud, confident character and find a newfound voice. After a session, a simple debrief can help reinforce what was learned.

Asking questions like, "What was it like to play as a leader today?" can help them connect their character's actions to their own experiences.

Your first quest: Getting started

Ready to try it out? Here are some tips for getting started:

- **Choose the right game:** While some classic games are great options, consider simpler, more kid-friendly games designed for younger players as a great entry point.

- **Keep it simple and short:** Start with a one-hour adventure. A clear beginning and end can help manage expectations.
- **Find your party:** The right group is essential. Look for groups that are specifically neurodiversity-friendly, or build your own with friends you trust. You can also consider hiring a professional game leader or a therapist who uses RPGs in their practice. They are experts at facilitating and creating a safe, inclusive environment.
- **Focus on effort over perfection:** The goal is to have fun and work together, not to play perfectly. Celebrate small wins, like a player sharing a cool item with a friend who needs it.
- **Use visual supports:** Character sheets, turn cards, or even simple checklists can help keep everyone on track and reduce cognitive load.

Our children need a space where it's okay to try new things and learn what it means to be a good friend. They won't always get this from a worksheet or therapist. They might get this from a goblin, a dragon, and a team of loyal companions ready to face any challenge, together.

Tips for making it work

To make your role-playing game sessions a success, it's helpful to establish a few key practices. First, set clear expectations and routines at the beginning of each session. Knowing what to expect will reduce anxiety and help everyone focus on the game.

You can also offer visual support, like character sheets or turn cards, to provide a tangible reference for your child.

> When a child plays as a brave knight or a wise wizard, they're permitted to try on a new personality.

It's crucial to celebrate small wins and focus on effort and growth rather than on perfect play. Whether it's a creative solution to a problem or a moment of successful collaboration, positive reinforcement goes a long way.

Finally, set aside a few minutes after each game to encourage debriefs. Discussing what happened in the game helps to reinforce the social and emotional lessons learned, connecting them back to real-life skills.

Start small for lasting skills

When embarking on this new adventure, remember to start small for lasting skills. The goal isn't to become a master game leader overnight, but to create a fun, valuable experience.

Reiterate the immense joy and value that role-playing games offer for social growth. They provide a safe space for your child to practice being a friend, a leader, and a collaborator.

If you're a parent who feels unfamiliar or hesitant, don't let that stop you. Take a small first step—maybe watch a few short videos, buy a simple starter kit, or just explore the basic rules with your child.

Focus on progress over performance, celebrating every laugh, every moment of teamwork, and every tiny victory along the way.

Challenge accepted!

As parents, our greatest quest is to equip our children with the tools they need to thrive. Some of the most valuable lessons can be learned around a kitchen table, surrounded by dice and character figurines.

Role-playing games offer a unique, joyful, and effective way for our children to practice social skills in a safe space. They're not just playing a game; they're learning to listen, empathize, and collaborate.

> “Our children need a space where it's okay to try new things and learn what it means to be a good friend. They won't always get this from a worksheet or therapist.”

They're building friendships and confidence, one roll of the dice at a time. The real magic is in the lasting social skills, friendships, and happy memories forged in these shared adventures.

Carol Tatom, BA.HSE, CHW, has a bachelor's degree in human services and is a licensed community health worker in Texas**.** Carol is also an autism parent, writer, and advocate for special needs. She is currently the Area Operations Director for Centria Autism. She enjoys working with families and helping them connect with support and resources that improve their quality of life.

in https://www.linkedin.com/in/carol-t-baa07a152/

Give Your Child a Voice — With Full, Meaningful Sentences Powered by AI

TalkThisWay.ai
Empowering Every Voice, One Sentence at a Time.

Created by a dad to help his autistic son communicate confidently — and now helping more families do the same.

💬**AI that expands your child's words into real conversation**
TalkThisWay.ai doesn't rely on a huge grid of pictures. Instead, smart AI turns the words your child selects into full sentences — spoken aloud in a natural, expressive voice. Just a few taps. Real words. Real connection.

SIGN UP HERE

🎁Special offer for Autism Parenting readers
Choose the option that works best for your family, use code at checkout:
FIRSTMONTHFREE — Get your first month 100% free
APM20 — Save 20% on an annual plan

✓ Works in any browser — no installation required
✓ Supports names, routines, places & custom vocabulary
✓ AI suggestions help grow language skills over time
✓ Great for tablets, laptops & assistive devices
✓ Designed for emerging communicators and AAC users

“This tool gave my son a voice — we can have conversations now.”

www.talkthisway.ai

Success Story:
Music Is His Voice

Bozena Gasior describes her nonspeaking son's life-changing discovery of music. Have a success story you want to share? Click here.

Imagine being told your two-year-old has moderate to severe autism. Then imagine a school psychologist telling you that your five-year-old's IQ is so low, it can't even be measured.

Now fast forward to today. Picture that same child at 22, performing Mozart and Chopin on stage to thunderous applause, yet still unable to communicate verbally. This is my son, Milosz's story.

He has defied limitations and proven that, with love, patience, and perseverance, the language of music can open doors that words cannot.

The early years

Milosz was born in March 2003 in Clearwater, Florida, two years after his father and I emigrated from Poland. His early development appeared

Milosz was diagnosed with moderate to severe autism at two and a half.

similar to that of his older, neurotypical brother, Patryk.

Over time, Milosz became increasingly withdrawn, and at age two, he was diagnosed with severe to moderate autism. It was a heartbreaking moment for me, but mourning quickly transformed into mission as I vowed to give Milosz the highest quality of life possible.

Discovering music

Milosz was introduced to music at age seven. Sitting with a small electric keyboard, he discovered he could control sound by pressing keys. The piano became a bridge. While he couldn't speak, he could express himself in melodies.

Together, we progressed through the first music book at home, recording his first recital in our living room. He was focused, joyful, and more present than ever.

Early efforts to find the right teacher were discouraging. Some treated him with lowered expectations due to his diagnosis.

Milosz and Bozena

Then I found Mr. Fred, known for his high standards. I asked him to try three lessons without initially revealing Milosz's autism. After the third session, Mr. Fred agreed to continue, and he has remained Milosz's teacher for more than a decade.

Milosz's musical skills blossomed. Music became his form of social inclusion, especially in school. He joined the jazz band in middle school and thrived with the help of his exceptional student education (ESE) assistants.

Then Milosz auditioned for the prestigious Pinellas County Center for the Arts (PCCA) at Gibbs High School, becoming the first autistic piano major in the school's 35-year history.

Though his reading comprehension peaked at the fourth-grade level, Milosz graduated magna cum laude, in the top 10% of his class, earning a standard diploma.

His success was made possible due to the support of dedicated teachers, administrators, and his ESE team. It truly took a village.

Continued accomplishments

Beyond the classroom, Milosz's accomplishments continue to inspire. In 2022, he was named "Mr. Inspirational" by a Florida nonprofit. His award-winning performance at the organization's gala earned standing ovations.

That same year, while performing at a local international airport, he caught the attention of Broadway creator Mark Schoenfeld, who encouraged me to share our journey more widely.

Since June 2024, Milosz has been a weekly volunteer performer at a local cancer center, offering comfort and hope through music. I accompany him, seeing how music creates a sense of belonging in Milosz and brings peace to those who listen.

Patients often pause to thank him, sharing how his playing helped them through difficult moments. Some return each week just to hear him again.

The leadership has welcomed Milosz warmly. In one unforgettable moment, one of the doctors joined in, singing spontaneously as Milosz played. It was a powerful, unscripted connection through music.

Milosz's story has gained national attention, with performances featured on public television across the U.S., highlighting the role of music in healing and inclusion.

My son has played at the Embassy of Poland in Washington, D.C., as well as for an art and culture museum in Florida, and for Polish-American communities in Chicago and beyond (including three concerts in Poland).

Each setting becomes a platform for Milosz to connect and challenge perceptions about autism. Whether at a hospital, airport, or museum, his focus is never on applause—it's on the act of sharing and serving.

Though minimally verbal and requiring daily support, Milosz has accomplished more than many thought possible. Music is his voice. His music offers something powerful: connection.

And perhaps that is Milosz's greatest gift of all.

Advice to others

Ask for help early and often. People want to support you, but they need to know you need it. Reject limiting beliefs. I was told to lower my expectations. I didn't. I asked people to give Milosz a chance, and he rose to it.

Educators and community leaders must believe in potential.

> “Milosz was introduced to music at age seven. Sitting with a small electric keyboard, he discovered he could control sound by pressing keys. The piano became a bridge.”

Today, Milosz continues to perform and advocate for inclusion. His music speaks what words cannot: everyone has something beautiful to offer.

His story reminds us that success doesn't always look the same. Sometimes, it sounds like a melody, played from the heart, by someone who found his voice without ever speaking a word.

Milosz:

asdvirtuoso.org

https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100076157235972

@asdvirtuoso

@asdvirtuoso

Milosz Gasior Defying Autism with Music

Bozena:

https://www.facebook.com/bozena.gasior.2025/

Knowledge is power. I help clients apply for, appeal and manage Social Security Disability, Medicare and Medicaid Benefits. Work with me to understand:

- How Social Security defines “disability” for children and adults.
- How Supplemental Security Income (SSI) works.
- How Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) works.
- How Disabled Adult Child (DAC) benefits work.
- How Medicaid eligibility categories differ.
- How Medicaid Waivers work.
- How to use Work Incentives to maximize earned income and public benefits.

Pathways to Benefits
Disability Benefits Explained

SCAN ME

Schedule your complementary consultation today.

Alexandra Baig, MBA, CFP®, ChSNC®,
NSSA®, CWIP, CMP®
alexandra@pathwaystobenefits.com
https://pathwaystobenefits.com

Ending Conversations: Tips for a Smooth Exit

By **Marci Melzer, MEd-SLP**

Knowing how and when to stop a conversation is important.

To feel confident in conversation, it's just as important to know how to end the experience as it is to initiate. Sometimes, stopping uncomfortable conversations can be even more challenging.

Here are some tips to develop this crucial skill for self-advocacy and maintaining well-being.

Stopping conversations can be difficult

Ending uncomfortable conversations can be challenging for anyone; however, for many on the spectrum, there are added layers of difficulty.

- **Behavior expectations**: Individuals with autism sometimes feel pressure to adhere to unspoken social rules. They fear that standing up for themselves will make someone angry or that the person will not like them.
- **Concern about seeming rude**: The thought of unintentionally offending someone can limit a person's motivation to address their own emotional needs.
- **Masking**: This strategy of maintaining a false sense of social ease is exhausting, especially in uncomfortable situations. Being true to one's feelings without "breaking character" can feel nearly impossible.
- **Sensory overload and social fatigue**: Conversations can be overly sensory experiences, requiring the processing of various voices, gestures, and eye contact. If a trigger happens suddenly or social fatigue sets in, uncontrolled meltdowns can happen.

The need to end a conversation may be about self-preservation. It's important to have tools to detach when needed.

Exiting an uncomfortable conversation can go more smoothly when you try these tips.

Prepare go-to scripts for tough times

Pre-planned responses are the tools for your escape. Think of them as your "exit strategies."

Learn what works for others

Observe conversations on screen or in person and listen to what people say when they want to end a conversation. Take notes and try their approach.

Prepare go-to phrases

Use a specific phrase to explain your situation when you are struggling. These examples illustrate why you need to take a break from talking.

- "I need a break now." (I'm not comfortable with this topic.)
- "It was nice talking to you, but I have to go." (I'm done talking about this.)
- "I'm feeling overwhelmed and need some quiet time." (I am fighting a crisis.)

Written cards or AAC

If words are not yet accessible in conversation, consider preparing written cards or using AAC (augmentative and alternative communication) devices with programmed phrases like the examples above.

Practice and role-playing

Practicing these scenarios out loud can reduce anxiety about speaking up for yourself. Role-playing can help you feel more confident and prepared for social experiences where conversation is expected.

> "The need to end a conversation may be about self-preservation. It's important to have tools to detach when needed."

In-the-moment strategies

Sometimes, uncomfortable conversations come up when you least expect them. Try these tips to ensure a smooth exit.

Recognize your signals

Pay attention to your body's signals throughout the conversation. When you start feeling anxious, tired, or overstimulated, your body will react. You will want to escape, and words may not come easily.

These are cues that it's time to end the conversation.

Respond to your feelings

Acknowledge that you are uncomfortable and it's OK to want to get away. It's your responsibility to look after yourself. Use your go-to phrases to escape!

Use body language

Non-verbal communication can communicate feelings quickly. These communication strategies illustrate why you might end the conversation.

- Take a step back to show that you do not feel connected.
- Hold your hands up to show you do not feel safe.
- Walk away to show that you are overwhelmed or frustrated.
- Gather your things or put on your coat to show you are ready to leave.

Emotional, physical, or sensory signals are vital indicators that it is time to disengage.

If words don't come easily when you feel triggered, include these non-verbal cues and ways to disengage in your practice sessions when you are role-playing conversations.

Setting boundaries and dealing with pushback

Sometimes, even when you try to end an uncomfortable conversation politely, there could be pressure to stay. Be true to your feelings and assert your needs. If someone ignores your attempts to leave, do the following:

- **Repeat your exit phrase:** State it firmly but calmly, as many times as you need, until they get it.
- **Ask for help**: People who care about you will not want you to suffer. Ask for the space, time, and understanding you need to navigate a conversational setting.
- **Assert boundaries**: It's your right to set boundaries. You don't need to feel guilty for needing space. Phrases like "I'm not comfortable continuing this right now" can be very powerful. It is crucial to encourage self-advocacy in these situations.

> Emotional, physical, or sensory signals are vital indicators that it is time to disengage.

Many people simply do not know how to talk with individuals on the autism spectrum. That's not your fault. All you can do is try your best to communicate positively or activate your exit strategy.

What to do after ending a conversation

After you've ended an uncomfortable conversation, you may be tempted to relive the experience over and over in your mind. Instead of dwelling on what went wrong, try these tips to help you work through the experience.

Self-care tips

When your energy feels chaotic, frustrated, or upset, the first thing to do is regulate.

- Grounding exercises can help reconnect your body with your surroundings.
- Listening to your favorite dance music or podcast can feel empowering.
- Stimming can help regulate your sensory system.
- Resting or playing a game can help recharge your energy and give you some space.

Reflect on what works

Reflect on past conversations to plan for better ones in the future.

- Notice the triggers in conversation that affected you most.
- Think of the conversation starters and exit strategies that empower you.
- Be determined to practice empowering yourself whenever the opportunity arises.

Practice and celebrate

Ending conversations, like starting them, is a skill that gets better with practice.

Prioritize self-care by openly sharing your struggles and what you need. Role-playing is an excellent strategy for working through potentially triggering situations that cause anxiety.

Practice your conversation starters and exit phrases intentionally. Start conversations with family and friends who will give you objective feedback. When you say the words out loud, pay attention to how you feel.

Conversations are a two-way experience, so find partners who show you the same respect and value that you bring to the table. Keep your exit strategies ready for anyone else.

Each time you successfully end a conversation in a way that feels good to you, celebrate! Give yourself credit for overcoming a tough situation with grace.

Small wins add up and help to make this skill feel attainable.

I hope these tips help you feel more confident and comfortable navigating the end of conversations.

It's all about finding what works for you and honoring your needs. You've got this!

References:

Figueiro, M. G., & Kennedy, J. J. (2024, August 11). Autism conversation starters: Building meaningful connections and understanding. NeuroLaunch. https://neurolaunch.com/autism-conversation-starters/

Silver, K., & Parsons, S. (2022). Perspectives of autistic adults on the strategies that help or hinder successful conversations. Autism & Developmental Language Impairments, 7. https://doi.org/10.1177/23969415221101113

Resources:

Melzer, M. (2019). If it isn't FUN it ISN'T fun: Teach your child to talk faster than speech therapy. Amazon Digital Services. https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07Y17XZFC

Marci Melzer, MEd-SLP, is an intuitive SLP, author, speaker, and consultant. Her platform is a source of training and support for parents, caregivers, and professionals, helping all individuals who are late talkers learn to use the words they need to share their wisdom with the world.

🌐 WavesofCommunication.com

Take a Swing
PORTABLE STURDY PROFESSIONAL
CHILD AND ADULT MODELS

THE ORIGINAL
HOMESTAND II
with Plywood Platform, Jr.

OUR NEW
SWING ALL
The free standing swing frame that feels solid as a rock

Take a Swing
Albuquerque, NM 87123
(505) 503-1661
mail@takeaswing.com
www.takeaswing.com

Order through the Take a Swing website or from one of our many online distributors

Manufacturing quality swing stands right here in America since 1999.

Stress-Free Santa Visits

By **Cory Morrison**

Here are some tips for a stress-free visit with Santa.

Many families bring their children to meet Santa so the little ones can tell him what they want, take a picture with him, or receive a gift at a Christmas party.

How might an autistic child deal with meeting Santa for the first time? It definitely varies, but there are ways parents can make this encounter manageable, unforgettable, and fun.

Understanding the challenges

First, remember that crowds can be intense in malls, especially on weekends or weekday evenings when Santa is present. Crowds can mean sensory overload for many autistic children. Combined with noise, it can be quite unsettling.

Some individuals with autism may have deficits in verbal communication to the extent that they may need adult prompts to help them with what to say to Santa. Additionally, some may even struggle to know what they want for Christmas.

Because many autistic individuals thrive with familiarity, interacting with unfamiliar faces can be challenging.

Some autistic children may have common anxious thoughts before they meet Santa, such as “What if Santa doesn’t think I’m a good boy or girl?” and “I hope Santa likes me!”

The holiday season can create many disruptions to regular routines. A playdate with a neighbor may

be postponed simply because a family struggles to fit the Santa visit into their schedule.

When these occurrences happen, it can be very distressing to autistic children.

It's important to remember, however, that many families (even with neurotypical children) may go through these difficulties with meeting Santa for the first time, so there's no need to feel ashamed.

Preparing for the visit

You may want your child to be prepared for the crowds and know what to say to Santa. You also don't want them to hide or run away during the event. Social stories and visual schedules can be very useful.

You can show the child pictures of yourself as a child with Santa. Roleplaying will also help your child become familiar with the activity, which can lead to a more positive outcome.

If you feel that even social stories may not entirely prevent sensory issues, you can also allow the child to bring headphones and fidget toys. You could also visit during less busy hours, if possible.

Sensory-friendly Santa events

Look into events such as "Sensitive Santa," where you can expect some of the following accommodations:

- Reduced lighting and noise
- Extended appointment times to allow for a more comfortable experience

> Some individuals with autism may have deficits in verbal communication to the extent that they may need adult prompts to help them with what to say to Santa.

- Trained Santa staff who will know how to interact with autistic children (for example, not scolding a child for forgetting what to say or for not making much eye contact)

If done correctly, these events can be much more enjoyable for a child with sensory challenges.

How can I find or create these events close to home? You may need to do some research first.

You can also team up with other people in your community to get relevant organizations to create sensory-friendly Santa events, since some communities may not always have them.

Although it may be a lot of work, it could be worth it for many children on the spectrum.

Suggestions for parents upon arrival

What should parents do upon arrival at the Santa destination with their child? First, inform the staff in charge about the child's sensory sensitivities and social skills. Certain noises can be triggering to an autistic child, even "ho-ho-ho".

These sensitivities can vary from person to person, so a staff member needs to know what specifically triggers the child.

Some autistic children may refuse close physical contact. Standing next to Santa instead of sitting on his lap may be a good alternative.

Also, especially on the first visit, it may take time for the child to warm up to Santa. They will need to adjust and feel comfortable in their environment before a positive visit can occur.

If the standard Santa routine (briefly conversing, sitting on his lap, and not having a parent in the photo) is particularly difficult for the child, don't be afraid to consider other options. The child can wave, give Santa a high-five, or take a photo with a parent.

Most importantly, parents and staff must be patient and prepared for the possibility that things may not always go as planned.

My personal story

I loved the holidays so much as a preschooler that I associated Christmas and Santa with a sense of calmness. There were, however, several years when I needed my mother to prompt me with what to say to the mall Santa about what I wanted for Christmas.

Yet, I didn't hesitate to sit on his lap, interact with him, and have my picture taken. I didn't mind the noise or crowds back then because my mother was always close by.

Santa without stress

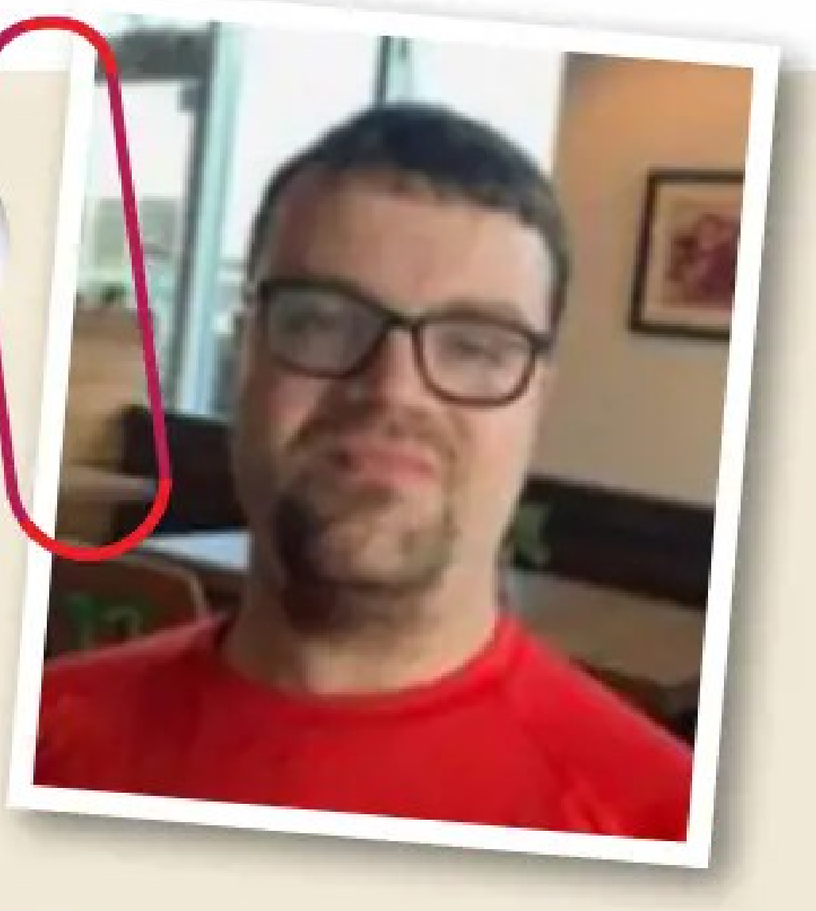
There's no universally correct way to prepare for a Santa visit because every child on the spectrum is so unique. To make it work, it's crucial to understand what brings the child joy and what may be uncomfortable for them.

However, even if things don't go so well for the first time, making progress is more important than perfection. If even just one part of the visit goes well, then that is a huge accomplishment.

If you're worried that the visit might not work out, you can always ask your child what they want and follow their lead. You want the event to be festive without overwhelming them.

Approach these traditions for making unforgettable memories in a way that works best for all involved, especially the child.

I wish you a happy holiday and a jolly meeting with Santa!



Cory Morrison is 32 years old and has lived in the Toronto area his whole life. He was diagnosed with autism at 3.5 years old. He is a college journalism graduate with an increasing interest in writing and publishing content. He also has special interests in weather, music (listening and playing), motivational quotes, and autism advocacy.

🌐 www.asdtoday.com

f https://www.facebook.com/CoryBradleyDennisMorrison/

https://www.instagram.com/corybdmorrison93/

X https://twitter.com/corymorrison93?lang=en

in https://ca.linkedin.com/in/cory-morrison-8ba0b2182

How Can the School Counselor Support My Child?

By **Dr. Ronald I. Malcolm, EdD**

The school counselor can provide support and services for your child and family.

As parents raising children with autism, it is often easy to find yourself in situations where you are overwhelmed, dealing with various professionals daily.

As you explore how each of these individuals can assist you and your family, I challenge you to consider the school counselor.

Here are some services that a school counselor may be able to provide to your child, as well as your other family members.

An extra set of eyes

As a parent of a child with autism, you may be focusing your attention on their teacher or special education providers. It is easy to overlook the services that a school counselor can provide.

Many school counselors are trained to observe and assist students who are having trouble regulating their behaviors or emotions appropriately. Having your child bond with the school counselor can be beneficial.

Counselors can observe in classrooms and be an “extra set of eyes” to witness the struggles your child may be encountering. They can assist with collecting the necessary data to support the services, accommodations, or modifications that your child may require for a successful school day.

Social skills training

Many students with autism often struggle in social situations. They may attempt to "mask" to "fit in." They may also attempt to memorize certain "scripts" that they believe will assist them when finding themselves in the middle of a reciprocal conversation.

Many school counselors are skilled at helping children develop their social skills. They can help your child practice these skills in a safe and comfortable environment. They can also provide feedback on how your child is progressing with their skills.

Counselors can also work with your child on strategies to use to protect themselves in the event of bullying situations.

Students with autism can be shown different ways to respond as well as how to appropriately report any bullying incidents to their school principal, teachers, or parents.

De-escalation techniques

Most parents are aware that there are various factors and situations that their child with autism can encounter daily that can escalate their behaviors. Your child can work directly with your school counselor on de-escalation strategies and how to employ them when necessary.

Many students often find that the school counselor's office becomes a "safe place" to de-escalate when their stress or anxiety levels begin to increase. They can ask for permission to go there to receive the time and support needed to calm down. They can then return to their regular school environment.

Access to other peers

The school counselor knows your child's school peers and may be aware of other students with autism. With permission, they could introduce your child to others in the school who share their daily struggles.

Children with autism can also benefit from involvement with their non-disabled peers. The counselor may have formed some small student groups that are struggling with some of the following issues:

- responding appropriately to redirection
- difficulty making friends
- engaging in socially appropriate conversations
- struggling with various academic concerns

Allowing your child to participate in such a group could offer them incredible insight into how their peers are addressing their daily issues with success.

Sibling support

As parents, it is often easy to become "hyper-focused" on your child with autism at the expense of their siblings. It isn't something a parent does intentionally. It is generally done out of necessity.

The school counselor can also be beneficial to your neurotypical children. Many school counselors run support groups for students who have a disabled sibling in the home or attending school with them.

Having your non-autistic children attend such a sibling support group can provide them with a safe place to discuss their feelings and challenges.

They can interact with other young people who deal with the same concerns regarding their siblings who may be disabled.

Assistance to educators and IEP support

At times, within a school environment, even the regular education teacher struggles to locate assistance and resources for a student with autism. A school counselor can often step in and offer such help.

They can observe your child in the regular classroom, offering feedback and support to both your child and their classroom teacher.

School counselors can also be part of your child's IEP team and offer support to related service personnel, such as speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, elective teachers (music, art, physical education), and other staff.

Parent group supports

School counselors have a wealth of information that could benefit you as a parent.

They may conduct parent support groups at school for those who have children with disabilities. They may also be aware of parent support groups within the local community or in a hospital or clinical setting.

They may be able to arrange a meeting between you and other parents of children with autism, if interested.

Access to community resources

Many parents raising children with autism may be working full-time and raising other children. They might also be juggling extracurricular activities for all their children, and may be exhausted by the end of the day.

Parents often have limited time to access information surrounding community resources for themselves and their child.

Most school counselors have a vast array of resources in addition to the school services. Some that accommodate children with autism include the following:

- additional academic tutoring
- daycare-related services
- doctors and health care providers
- local church programs that offer after-school programs

Obtaining these resources from your school counselor can save you a lot of time.

Classroom presentations

Throughout the year, a school counselor can provide direct presentations in a classroom, offering insight about individuals with autism to regular education students. They can even prep the classroom teacher before your child's arrival.

A school counselor can encourage classroom teachers to

- read books aloud to students that discuss autism,
- celebrate Autism Awareness Month,
- help your child develop a circle of friends.

Post-secondary options

School counselors are experts at helping students access post-secondary options such as

- working full-time after high school,
- accessing supportive housing arrangements,
- attending a vocational training center,
- attending a local university.

The school counselor can guide you and your child in the right direction to obtain the necessary paperwork that both of you must complete to access these programs.

Specifically, they can assist your child with a career-interest inventory to help them determine a career choice.

They can inform your child about the dates for their ACT exams. They can also help them with writing a resume, applying for financial aid, and learning how to access disability related services on a university campus or vocational training school.

School counselor support

Many parents may not realize the support and services that the school counselor can provide. Yet, they can be a significant support to your child and even their siblings.

They can help with classroom regulation, provide a safe space during stressful or anxious times, or enhance social skills.

They can teach other students about acceptance, provide parents with resources, and help students determine post-secondary options.

If you are looking for resources to support your child with autism in the school setting or beyond, consider reaching out to your school counselor.

Dr. Ronald I. Malcolm, EdD, is an Assistant Director of Student Services and Special Education for a public school district. He is an Associate Faculty Member with the University of Phoenix and a Special Graduate Faculty Member at the University of Kansas. He holds bachelor's degrees in English and special education, and master's degrees in counseling, special education, and school administration. His doctorate is in educational leadership, and his post-graduate degrees are in positive behavior supports and autism spectrum disorders. He has worked with students between the ages of 3 and 21 with autism and various medical needs in school and community-based settings for the past 41 years.

in https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-ronald-malcolm-11983539

Christmas Stress with Autism

By **Alex Manners**

Here are some reasons Christmas may be stressful for those on the spectrum.

Christmas is supposed to be a time of fun and laughter, where families get together and celebrate. However, for individuals on the autism spectrum, there are reasons why Christmas can be a very stressful and uncertain time of the year.

Changes to routine

One reason we might find this time of the year difficult is that many changes are happening around us that affect our daily routines.

Extra parties and events can cause disruptions, as can time off from work and school for the annual Christmas holiday. Many of our weekly activities and clubs will also be postponed the week leading up to or after Christmas.

Every Christmas, I try to follow the same routines so I know exactly what to expect. On Christmas Eve, I visit my squash club with my grandparents. On Christmas Day, I spend time with my cousins, and on Boxing Day, I go to a football match with my uncle.

Christmas parties

There are many sensory challenges we must encounter at Christmas, from the bright lights and bold colors to the smells of different foods. Christmas parties can be overwhelming due to the sensory stimuli and the people around us.

Every New Year's Eve, my grandparents would host a family party at their house. There were around twenty of us each year, and it was always hectic and noisy.

While I enjoyed each party, I would always go upstairs to my grandad's bedroom for about five or ten minutes, as I needed a break from all the people, sounds, and smells. My brain would become overloaded, and I needed a sensory break from all the information I was receiving.

At another family party a few years ago, my uncle rented a room above a pub. At one point, the music was turned up, and the room became very loud. Coupled with the claustrophobic atmosphere, I knew that I had to get out straight away. Luckily, there was a courtyard out the back where I could sit.

Decorations

Most people love that time of the year when they can start putting up decorations. Yet, someone with autism might find the brightly lit Christmas lights, bold colors of decorations, and cluttered spaces overwhelming.

When there are many decorations, familiar places can suddenly seem unfamiliar, even in our own homes.

It is best to plan exactly what and where you want to put any Christmas decorations around your house. If they become overwhelming, consider placing them in less frequently used spaces.

Having decoration-free areas gives you the option to go somewhere without decorations if needed.

Consider putting up the decorations gradually rather than all at once to ensure that you can familiarize yourself with a few things before adding any more.

Socializing

Socializing is another significant part of Christmas that can present numerous challenges for individuals on the spectrum. You might be meeting family and friends whom you hardly ever see and don't feel comfortable around.

These individuals may not understand you as well as your immediate family or parents. Therefore, you might feel the need to mask to try to fit in, whether socializing, joining in with games, or eating Christmas dinner. Socializing can be exhausting!

If you find that you are masking a lot over the Christmas period, then allow yourself some quiet time alone. Just going for a walk on your own during a family gathering can be very helpful.

If you or a loved one feels confident to do so, then explain to family members about some of the things that you might find difficult, such as physical interactions or small talk.

Presents

I came across a quote from an autistic man who shared that receiving gifts can be stressful for him. I often feel the same way. I appreciate any present I receive, knowing that the person bought it because they like me and want me to be happy.

However, knowing that does not change how I feel. I have many items in my bedroom and am always worried about receiving something I don't want or that will take up space I don't have there.

I also don't like surprises. Most of my family will give me money or let me choose something I want. This is a great strategy as it removes some of the uncertainties surrounding Christmas.

When I was younger, if my parents bought something I didn't want, I would always tell them, "Honesty is the best policy." I am very black-and-white in the way I think, and I reasoned that they may have been able to get their money back or exchange it for something I wanted.

One Christmas, they gave me a new TV, and I felt quite flat as I peeled away the wrapping paper. I asked why they had bought this when I already had one. However, I actually used this TV for years, and in the end, it was one of the most useful presents I have ever received.

My disappointment with that gift was that I did not want to think my parents had spent a lot of money on me. They did enough for me and didn't need to pay extra at Christmas.

Christmas can be magical for all

Christmas is a very special time of the year, and despite my struggles, I still absolutely love it.

Everyone with autism is different and will find various aspects of Christmas challenging. They will also have different coping mechanisms.

With the right support, everyone can enjoy the magic of Christmas.

Alex Manners is 29, an autism and neurodiversity speaker, Asperger's champion, presenter, and author. Alex presents motivational and educational talks about what it is like to live, work, and attend school with Asperger's and autism to various companies, law firms, schools, and universities throughout the UK. He has also published a book called "That's Not Right! My Life Living with Asperger's", appeared on series 10 and 11 of "The Undateables" on Channel 4, and is obsessed with football, watching a game at all 92 English Football League clubs.

www.thealexmanners.com

https://www.youtube.com/user/thealexmanners

https://www.linkedin.com/in/alexmanners/

https://www.instagram.com/thealexmanners/

Building Confidence and Connection Through Safer Tech

By **Bark**

What if technology could support you and your child, giving you reassurance and peace of mind?

For neurodiverse families, every milestone looks a little different, especially when it comes to technology. Tablets, smartwatches, and phones provide connection, education, and entertainment, but they can also exacerbate anxiety, overwhelm, and sensory challenges.

You know that technology can be both a lifeline and a source of stress. One moment, it helps your child communicate, self-soothe, or connect; the next, it's a battle over time, boundaries, or even sensory overload. It's complicated, and you're not alone in feeling that way.

What if we told you there were tech devices that you could actually feel good about giving to your child? Ones that provide all of the benefits of technology while allowing you to customize every way your child interacts with it, tailored to their unique way of seeing the world?

Tech that works with families, not against them

At Bark, we're a team of parents who build safer smart devices for kids. We're not autism specialists, but we are experts in children's online safety. We've spent the past decade learning from families who use Bark every day.

Many parents raising children on the autism spectrum tell us that Bark helps bring more calm and confidence to their digital routines by giving them tools to track location, manage contacts, set access limits, and stay connected without constant worry.

The Bark Phone and the Bark Watch empower families to give their children a little bit of freedom without losing peace of mind. For neurodivergent children, this balance between freedom and support can be especially important. It helps them develop independence at their own pace while giving parents visibility, guidance, and reassurance every step of the way.

ASD kids have unique needs when it comes to technology

Every kid faces online challenges, but for neurodiverse kids, tech can come with an extra layer of complexity. What helps one child focus might completely overwhelm another, and that's where the right tools and flexibility matter.

The stress of daily screen time transitions

Transitions can be tricky when predictability matters. Starting or stopping screen time isn't just about turning off a device; it's about helping your child shift gears mentally and emotionally.

Bark helps make those moments smoother with automated screen-time schedules that adjust access instead of removing it altogether. Kids can keep using what you approve, while everything else stays limited.

Restrictive, one-size-fits-all controls

Most devices aren't built for kids, especially those who need things structured their way. Parents are often forced to choose between "too much access" or "too many restrictions," when what they really need is the ability to customize every detail to fit their child's rhythm and skill set.

Bark gives families that flexibility, offering comprehensive control over what, when, and how their child can use it.

Sensory overload

For kids who experience the world more intensely, the endless stream of videos, games, and notifications can be overwhelming. Bark helps parents tailor tech use around their child's sensory needs—allowing the apps that calm while limiting those that overstimulate.

Cyberbullying

Many neurodivergent kids interpret social cues differently, both in real life and online. Because tone and sarcasm don't always come across clearly, they may not realize when a joke turns unkind or when someone is crossing a line.

Scams in games or apps

Children on the autism spectrum often take things literally, which can make it hard to tell what's real online. Games, ads, or in-app offers can feel genuine when they're not. It's not about being naïve; it's about trusting what they see.

With guidance and the right tools, parents can help kids recognize what's safe and what's not before those digital traps appear.

Bark smart devices provide a safer way to connect

The Bark Watch and the Bark Phone aren't just trendy tech gadgets. They're devices that can provide high levels of support to your family throughout your kid's entire childhood.

Monitoring that keeps you in the know

Bark's advanced content monitoring scans texts, saved photos and videos, social media, and apps for signs of potential dangers. If something concerning—like bullying, online predators, or sexual content—pops up, you'll get an alert so you can check in and make sure everything's okay.

100% customizable features

With the Bark Phone, there are countless ways to make it truly form-fitting for your kid. Want to make it talk-only or text-only? No problem. Need only calling and a music app? Also cool. Want to turn off the app store? It takes just a tap.

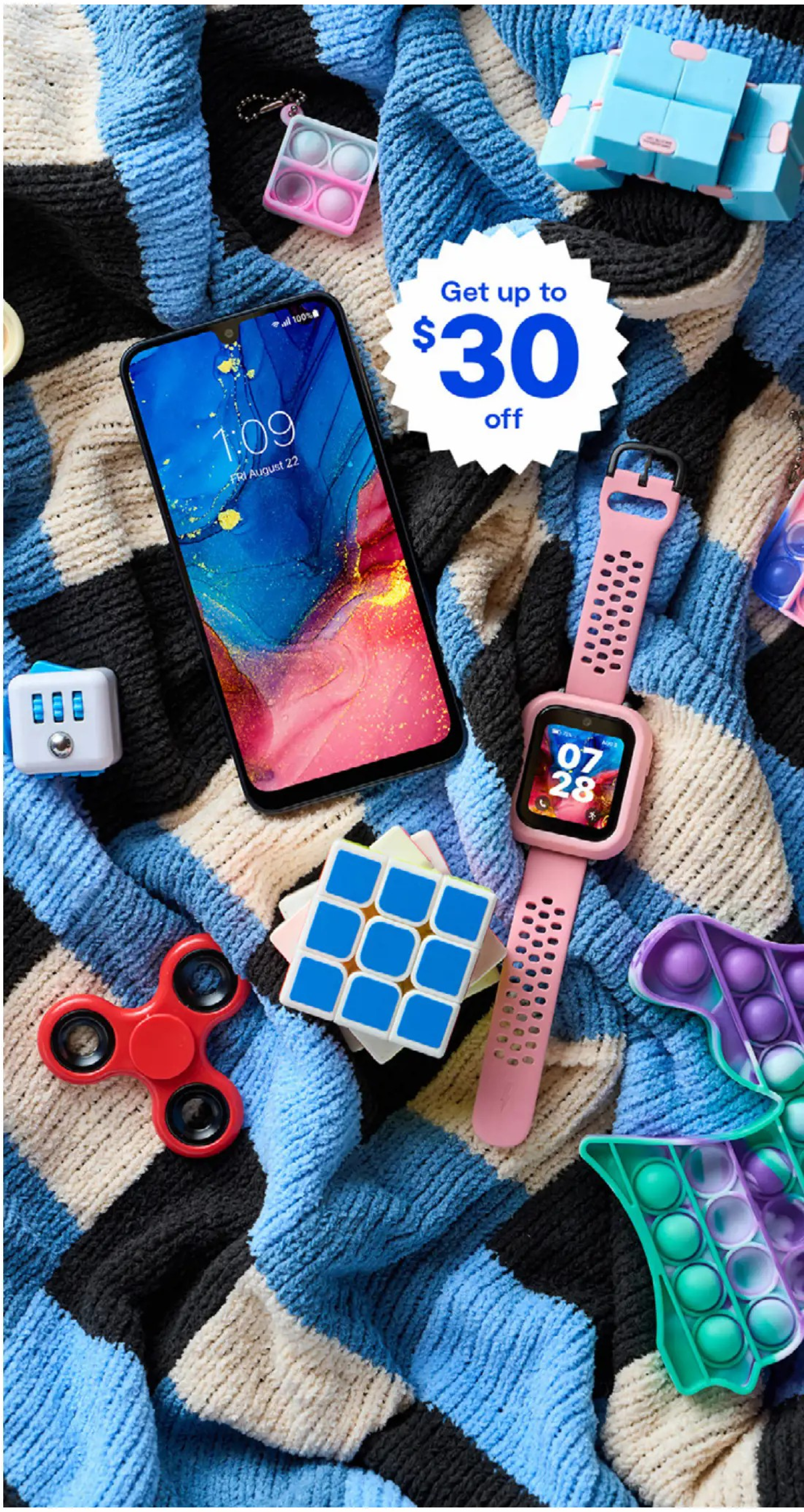
Screen time schedules that fit your family's life

Instead of arguing about screen time, you can set daily schedules that automatically limit access. This can look like "Only music apps after bedtime" or "No YouTube during the school day."

There are limitless options, helping to make transitions easier and expected.

Location tracking for peace of mind

Our GPS-powered location tracking gives you peace of mind with real-time updates and alerts you if your child wanders or strays from designated safe zones.



Guidance for every age and every stage with Bark

Here are a few ways Bark can help keep your kid safe online and in real life as they grow up with a smart device.

Early independence

Milestones: Watching videos online, texting family, or gaming solo for the first time.

The challenge: Content can be overstimulating, confusing, or even unsafe, and neurodiverse kids may not always know when they're in over their heads.

How Bark helps: Bark filters harmful content, monitors messages for concerning behavior, and gives parents gentle insight without constant hovering.

Growing social skills

Milestones: Joining group chats or online communities.

The challenge: Tone, sarcasm, and hidden meanings can be difficult to discern, leading to misunderstandings or bullying.

How Bark helps: Bark detects signs of cyberbullying, online manipulation, and inappropriate conversations so parents can step in early with guidance and support.

Finding balance and boundaries

Milestones: Using social media and texting friends by themselves.

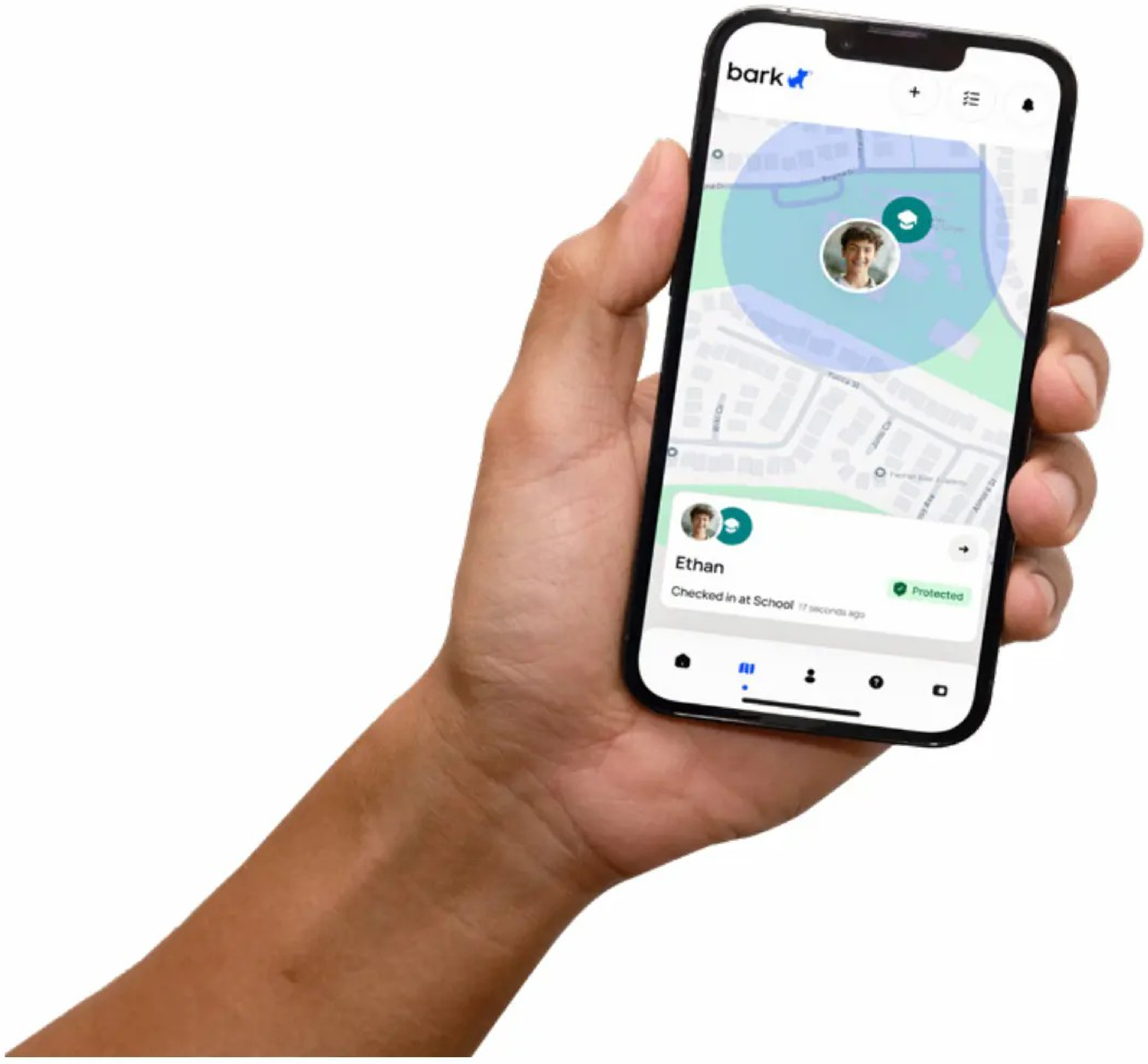
The challenge: Privacy, boundaries, and emotional regulation online can be complex for neurodiverse teens.

How Bark helps: Bark empowers parents to teach digital balance and build healthy tech habits that last into adulthood. Alerts can prompt hard but important conversations.

Connection without compromise

Bark devices open the door to connection and independence for kids on the autism spectrum, and they also provide parents with the support, tools, and peace of mind to allow it. For neurodivergent and special needs kids, the right tech can make all the difference.

> “Bark allows him to have a phone like his peers, but also allows me to manage who he can call and track his location in case he wanders.”
>
> – Bark mom



Learn more

Visit bark.us/learn/asdsafertech to learn more about how Bark helps families navigate tech with confidence and peace of mind.

Leslie Ann is the mom of three amazing kids, including one incredible son on the autism spectrum. For the past eight years, she's helped families keep their children safer online through her work with Bark. When she's not advocating for digital safety, she's gardening, fishing, or spending time with her family in the Texas Hill Country.

Ask Dr. Malcolm

By **Ronald I. Malcolm, EdD**

Dr. Malcolm answers parents' questions and concerns about their autistic children. You can submit your questions here.

Blossom of the U.S. asks:

[I have a] nine-year-old with friends, mild ADHD, and a level 1 ASD. [There are] no speech or OT needs and no major other needs. Are group social skills beneficial in lieu of [a] new ASD diagnosis if [the] kid has friends and has maintained friendships? Would that promote masking? Do we wait until it is a problem (e.g., middle school)? [The] kid never received ABA, so I worry [about] having missed early interventions. Thanks.

Autism is a spectrum. The characteristics can look different for each individual. You can have two children with the same level of autism from the same family, and each child presents with entirely different characteristics surrounding their autism.

What is masking?

Masking is an attempt to conceal an individual's behaviors that cause others to identify them as having autism. They may try to reduce their stimming behaviors or hide them from others.

In an attempt to "fit in" with their peers, the individual may copy their behaviors or memorize scripts to use in various social situations.

Their overall goal when interacting with others is to conceal their autism and appear as non-autistic.

There was a time when some children with autism were referred to as "high functioning" or "low functioning." Some individuals considered "high functioning" had the skills necessary to involve themselves in "masking."

Although we may no longer use the term "high functioning," there are still some children who will engage in masking.

Dangers of masking

Masking can be wearying for the child who is attempting to conceal their autism diagnosis. They can become physically exhausted from doing this daily, which can lead to more stress, as well as depression or overwhelming anxiety.

Concealing or attempting to conceal their autism can cause a child to deny their overall identity.

Autism is a lifetime diagnosis, and concealing it can lead to other mental health-related conditions occurring. Children need to embrace their autism and understand how this diagnosis makes them unique.

Finally, children with Level 1 autism who engage in masking are at particular risk. They receive certain levels of care surrounding their diagnosis, and masking their behaviors can lead to them not receiving the care or therapy they require.

Early intervention

Personally, I believe that early intervention is critical to the success of all children with autism. You can never start working on strategies for success too early.

As a child matures and becomes an adult, they will encounter many social and work-related situations. These situations will require them to successfully self-advocate.

However, you can't advocate for yourself with autism if you are convinced that you don't have it or are exhausting yourself by attempting to conceal it.

Social skills groups

Social skills groups typically consist of small groups of children of approximately the same age. For children with autism, these social skills groups often work on developing conversational skills or turn-taking behaviors.

Benefits of social skills groups

Being involved in social skills groups can have many positive outcomes for children. As they develop their social communication skills and improve their ability to communicate, they will also improve their own level of self-confidence.

A social skills group will allow children to identify a "safe place" where they can develop social skills and have the opportunity to practice with peers.

Children with autism who also have ADHD can reap the benefits of being involved in a social skills group. The group can help them properly manage impulse control and maintain flexibility when faced with social situations.

Peers with autism

Involve your child with other children at school and in the community on the spectrum to help make them aware that others also have autism. This will help them develop a healthy sense of identity and see that all children with autism are not the same.

Empathy is often a skill with which some children with autism can struggle. By engaging with other children on the spectrum, they can see that their struggle is also shared with others.

Parental involvement

Parents may notice that their child engages in scripting or that their responses are the same regardless of the topic. You may sense that they are smiling or agreeing with something that they don't understand, or are attempting to "fit in" with their peers.

You can have a safe conversation with your child, loving them and modeling appropriate social skill behaviors. Show them how social discussions occur while providing an opportunity to practice these skills.

Encourage and involve them in situations that allow a safe opportunity for "realistic practice."

Continue to encourage your child to develop friendships with peers by providing opportunities at home for them to invite their friends.

Enroll your child in community activities they enjoy, such as athletics, theater, vocal music, debate, instrumental music, scouting, and more.

Settings

Some children with autism will refuse to attend a social skills group if it occurs during the school setting. They may be concerned about being labeled by others as either "autistic" or "special education."

> "Autism is a lifetime diagnosis, and concealing it can lead to other mental health-related conditions occurring. Children need to embrace their autism and understand how this diagnosis makes them unique."

However, some social skills groups take place outside the school environment, such as at a hospital, church, counseling office, or in the community.

School counselors

While social skills training with peers is preferred, some children with autism would rather interact directly with a single adult.

Social skills training can help students with autism

- improve their listening skills,
- maintain eye contact,
- respect personal space and boundaries,
- recognize body language,

among other benefits.

Speak to your child's school counselor to see if they or a special education teacher would be willing to provide social skills instruction to your child.

Dr. Ronald I. Malcolm, EdD, is an Assistant Director of Student Services and Special Education for a public school district. He is an Associate Faculty Member with the University of Phoenix and a Special Graduate Faculty Member at the University of Kansas. He holds bachelor's degrees in English and special education, and master's degrees in counseling, special education, and school administration. His doctorate is in educational leadership, and his post-graduate degrees are in positive behavior supports and autism spectrum disorders. He has worked with students between the ages of 3 and 21 with autism and various medical needs in school and community-based settings for the past 41 years.

https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-ronald-malcolm-11983539

The Fine Line Between Supporting and Enabling

By **Kristi Jacobsen**

Caregivers should know when support becomes enabling.

As caregivers, it is second nature to want to support our child in every conceivable way. Our challenges can seem endless and discouraging.

They compel us to remove as many obstacles as possible to protect our children from what feels like an uphill battle that doesn't end as our children become adults.

Yet, in our quest to champion the best outcomes, there is a fine line between supporting and enabling. Knowing where and when to draw that line is important for a child's future independence, self-confidence, and well-being.

Supporting or enabling?

How do supporting and enabling differ? While it may seem obvious, these two are often intertwined and easily misinterpreted. Support provides care, encouragement, and compassion, while enabling can erode these qualities over time.

For me personally, I found enabling slipped by my radar under the guise of support, especially when my son was younger.

Children need many supports early in life, yet when that child has a disability, we can unintentionally assume their needs are greater and ongoing.

Sometimes the only way to know is to let your loved one gradually take the lead as you start to recognize their ability to do versus your need to do it for them.

If we continue to assume inability, we can risk unintentionally crossing the line to enabling.

For example, I would often help my son dress in the morning. My two reasons were to be on time and because I struggled to watch him attempt to do it for himself. Both of those were my issues, not his.

The more I helped him dress, the more he expected me to do it for him and would stop trying to do it himself. My supporting role had crossed over into enabling.

Enabling in daily life

Crossovers can occur in everyday life, from personal hygiene and dressing to getting a snack and putting away laundry.

Enabling is not empowering. When I supported my son's ability, he was encouraged to try, succeed, fail, and keep going. Enabling that gradually caused more frustration and self-doubt, impeding independence.

Knowing when support is needed

My epiphany came when my youngest directed my son to do something. Before I could step in to "support" him, he completed the task without me. I recognized that I needed a course correction.

I examined each task to determine if and what kind of support was needed.

- Was physical assistance or more time needed to complete the task?
- How did age appropriateness line up with timing and intellectual ability?
- Were there safety concerns?
- What communication was most effective: visual, modeling, physical, or verbal prompting?

Verbal prompting, however, can easily fall into enabling. For example, my son will shower forever if not prompted to get out. My continuous prompts were initially for support, but they quickly crossed into enabling and self-doubt.

My son remains dependent in some very familiar areas of routine and structure, where I over-supported to the point of enabling.

Looking toward adulthood

I had to consider the child and the future adult. By focusing on early interventions, we might overlook the impending transition to adulthood. Newly aware of the future adult, I redoubled my efforts to include the child and the man he would become.

What skills align with his abilities and will prove crucial to his adult independence? What will be relevant: Counting money or using a debit card? Writing versus typing? Tying shoes or wearing slip-ons?

Make a list to use as a future blueprint for achieving adult independence. I would have preferred to recognize this sooner. The beauty is that it's never too late to employ new strategies or overhaul existing ones.

I'm currently working with a BCBA to support my son behaviorally and to forge new ways of communication for him.

If you have younger children in ABA or other programs, consider evaluating which supports are working and which might be enabling or impeding future successes.

The more our children can do independently, the more they will be able to accomplish as adults. Sometimes, the best support is to step back and let them acquire skills on their terms, according to their abilities and timeframe.

Don't fear failure

Enabling comes so easily to us due to fear of failure. We need to shift our mindset, recognizing that failure is a part of growth for all of us, including those on the spectrum.

As parents, we often view failure as our biggest nemesis. Fear can derail us from doing what we know is necessary, but it is also a painful part of life lessons.

When we change our approach, we replace fear with a vision of the life we hope for them. With that in mind, start planning your strategies, goals, and supports.

> “Children need many supports early in life, yet when that child has a disability, we can unintentionally assume their needs are greater and ongoing.”

Now, look at your child's abilities, strengths, struggles, likes, dislikes, and other characteristics, both in the short and long term. The line begins to form as you shape the road moving forward, for them as well as you.

With this information, you can see where your role of support can segue into their future independence.

Setting boundaries

First, parents and caregivers must set realistic and healthy boundaries. While some support will always be necessary, this is where the gradual transition to adulthood begins. It will be difficult and sometimes painful to witness, but without failure, there is no growth.

Most importantly, give yourself grace. There is no perfect path or outcome, just forward progress. As you advance, hold on to supports that will help you during challenging times without enabling you. A step back is not necessarily going backward, though at times it may feel that way.

How enabling affects parents

Being the parent of an autistic adult encompasses your entire life and way of being. Support can sometimes feel exhausting and overwhelming, making the ease and allure of enabling more attractive. Enabling impacts us along the way.

You might recognize yourself in answering the following questions:

- Are you neglecting your needs?
- How frequently does fear dictate your decisions?
- How often do others' opinions or judgments supersede your own?
- Have you lost your identity in the role of caregiver?

I can say with honesty, been there, done that.

A stream of fear, anxiety, and guilt accompanies many parents on this journey; you are not alone. Finding support systems is crucial to ward off the ease of enabling.

Take time for yourself

As much as you give to your loved one, you must also give back to yourself. Allow yourself five minutes of solitude.

Go for a run, get respite care, let a friend or family member give you a needed break, or connect with other parents on social media. Support yourself on this journey wherever and whenever you can.

Most importantly, have faith in yourself, your abilities, and a love that will continue to be the driving force to a future of possibilities. It's ok to step out of line and grab whatever you need to take care of yourself along the way.

The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. For parents of autistic adults, the line we travel is not short or straight. Each line is different, with its own trajectory and destination.

The support we provide will determine our child's future independence and the direction and distance along the way. By recognizing our enabling, we make the necessary adjustments that empower positive outcomes for our loved ones.

There will always be a fine line between supporting and enabling. As with any line, it is infinite, and so are the possibilities.

Kristi Jacobsen is an author, speaker, blogger, ESE paraprofessional, and mother of three. Her work has spanned almost three decades, supporting and advocating for her 30-year-old autistic son, as well as a diverse population of students in her career as a paraprofessional. She started her blog, Rain Momm, three years ago to share her years of experience and collaborate with others on the journey. While much has changed in the 28 years since her son was diagnosed, Kristi feels much can be learned from the past as a proponent for future change with compassion, realism, and advocacy.

https://rainmomm.com

https://www.facebook.com/therealrainmom/

Autism Warrior - I Have a Voice and Deserve to Be Heard

By **Lindsey Moreland**

A young woman with autism offers hope and understanding for others.

Over the years, I've learned a lot about myself. Autism doesn't go away. It is a part of who I am. However, I've learned not only how to live with it in a world that doesn't always make sense to me, but also how to thrive with it.

I've learned that I'm capable, that I have a voice, and that I deserve to be heard.

PLEASE
KIND
I HAVE
AUTISM
Lindsey

Early years with autism

I was diagnosed with autism at just 28 months old. I was nonverbal and had severe tantrums. It was a confusing and emotional time for my family. They didn't have answers to so many questions and lacked a clear understanding of autism.

I share a piece of my journey with you not just to tell my story, but to offer hope, strength, and understanding to anyone who loves someone with autism.

My parents did everything they could. We went from doctor to doctor and appointment to appointment, and a speech therapist also came to our home once a week.

I received speech, physical, and occupational therapy three to four times a week at three different centers.

At just three years old, my mom was putting me on a bus to go to an early childhood program.

I don't remember much from those early years; mostly what I've seen in pictures and videos. Even though the memories are blurry, I know that those early interventions changed my life.

Accomplishments today

Yes, my school years continued to be extremely challenging for me. My classmates didn't understand me or my autism.

None of that stopped me from becoming a college graduate from the University of Wisconsin - River Falls, with my associate's degree.

Today, I work full-time, drive a car, and co-own a home with my sister. I have co-authored five books, am a poet, and have illustrated two books. I am also a public presenter for anti-bullying and autism acceptance.

My sister Brittany once said, “Life with autism is like a rollercoaster with ups and downs, and twists and turns.” And she’s right.

Our family has truly lived that ride. We’ve had moments of joy, frustration, triumph, and tears, but we’ve always had each other.

Today, at 31 years old, I’m proud of how far I’ve come. I am proud of all my accomplishments.

Little Lindsey
Gets a Haircut
Little Lindsey is a
Picky Eater
Little Lindsey
Makes a Friend
Little Lindsey
Goes to Therapy
A Sibling Story

Some of Lindsey’s books

Working together for inclusion, empathy, and awareness

Through books created by our family, we aim for a better understanding and greater inclusion.

We distribute our books to libraries, schools, daycare centers, and therapy clinics. They serve as accessible resources for children, educators, caregivers, and the broader community.

My mom also founded a nonprofit, and we seek to build [empathy](https://) and awareness.

From early childhood, we experience judgment, loneliness, bullying, and deep misunderstanding. Challenges shape our passion for change.

My family and I are committed to helping all people see autism, not as a barrier, but as a different way of experiencing the world.

🌐 https://www.autismlm.com/

f https://www.facebook.com/AustismLM

THE POWER OF RHYTHM AND MUSIC
RHYTHM AND MUSIC CAN IMPROVE MOTOR, SOCIAL, AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ASD.

Grade 1 plus
Remarkable Gains in Reading and Learning
METRONOME READING ACTIVITIES
IMPROVE: Attention, Word Attack, Visual Tracking, Reading Fluency, Reading Speed, Comprehension, Timing Issues, READING FUN
Games Puzzles Phonics
Matthew Glavach, Ph.D.
StrugglingReaders.com

NEURODIVERSE, All LEARNERS
DYSLEXIA, ADHD, AUTISM SPECTRUM, LEARNING DIFFERENCES
Reading Thru Rhythm & Songs 1
A Complete Reading Program
16 Lessons, 200 Page Reading Activity Book
•Phonics •Vocabulary •Fluency
•Rhythm •Movement •Songs
The melodic and rhythmic parts of speech are enhanced thru music and song.
Music can open new pathways and rewire the brain.
Grades 1 & 2 Reading Skills
Matthew Glavach, Ph.D., Reading Researcher, Author
StrugglingReaders.com

Research indicates that neurodiverse learners may face timing disruptions in the brain, and autistic children who do not react to speech may respond to music. Music and rhythm-based interventions can enhance motor, communication,and social skills in children with ASD.

Metronome Reading Activities by Matthew Glavach, Ph.D. offers puzzles, games, phonics instruction, and support for brain timing. - Grades 1 and up. $14.95

Reading Thru Rhythm and Songs by Matthew Glavach, Ph.D. uses music, songs, and the metronome to teach reading skills for grades 1-2 and support brain timing. $29.95 for a limited time.

StrugglingReaders.com

What's New On The Bookshelf?

Andy's Nature

By **Andrew Tait**

A neurodivergent individual shares his first novel about his life and observations.

First-time author Andrew Tait recounts his first thirty years of life on the autistic spectrum, with obesity, and a theory of supernatural phenomena. Young Andy's seclusion in the school yard, unreasonable fear of ordinary obstacles, insomnia, uncontrolled hunger, and inability to understand instructions may puzzle and outrage readers.

Andy's fretful imagination sanctifies such rituals as shifting woodchips around the technology classroom floor. Unwanted thoughts overwhelm him with shame, hypothetical stair-lain batteries threaten his murderous complicity, and most schoolwork remains incomprehensible.

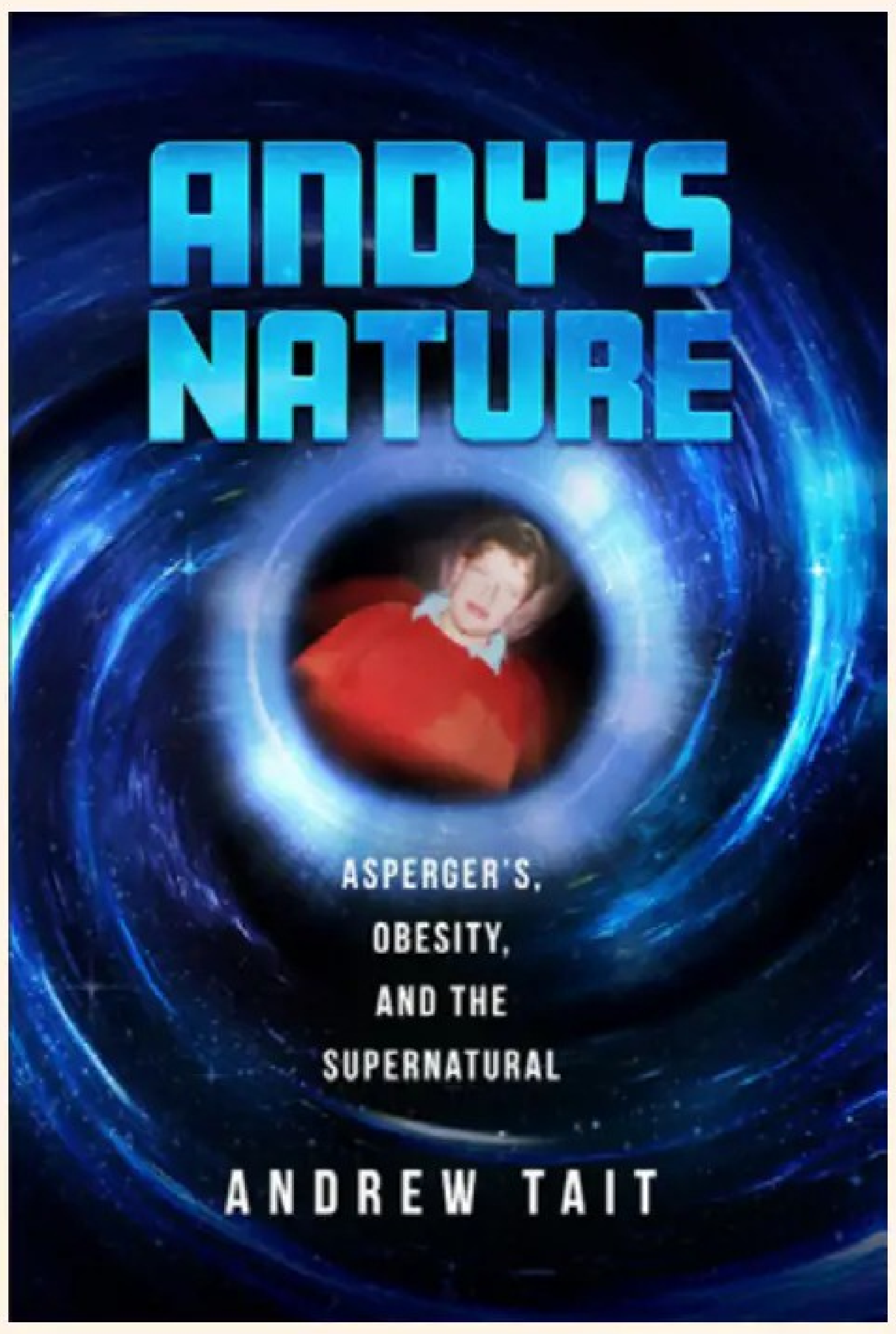
And no amount of exercise or resolve to "eat a bit less" does anything to shrink his torso.

Andy's mother's memory of a white-robed, golden glowing-glowing figure resembling a two-year-old Andy scaling the bedroom wall, and a voice coming from the stairway, lends Andy's confused existence a hint of something supernatural.

Near adulthood, for a medical procedure, Andy finally manages to lose some weight. He starts to see, in unrelated media faces, similarities which persuade him irresistibly of their kinship beyond genetics.

Walking the countryside at night, he sees numerous slowly drifting planes perform starkly improbable feats. In clear skies, stars appear to shrink from existence only to bloom into reappearance across the sky.

Psychiatric counseling traces some of Andy's unorthodox inhibitions to the autistic spectrum. Barely employable, he earns a wage on his father's army-rented ancestral farm. He then decides to adapt his confused existence into a book.

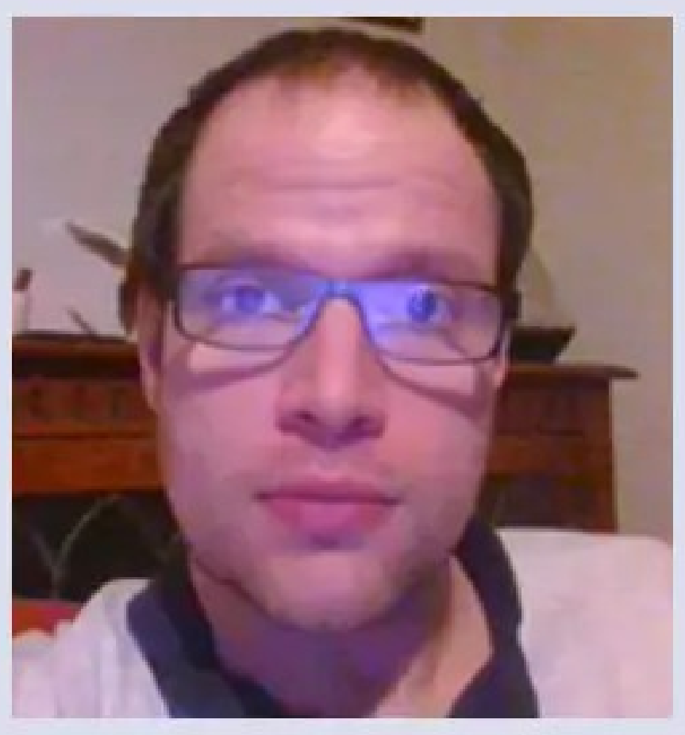


However, his obsessive-compulsive showering reaches an extent no one dared dream possible. Believing himself beyond adaptation to earthly life, further psychiatric counseling eventually veers Andy away from 19-hour bathroom sessions.

In this humorous, emotive, thought-provoking account, Andy explores society's willingness—or lack thereof—to accommodate unexpected inhibition, the resultant stigma, and the cosmic implications of his idea of "transgenic kinship."

https://www.andysnature.uk/

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Andys-Nature-Aspergers-Obesity-Supernatural



Andrew Tait always wanted to write stories. However, an irrational sense of shame would overwhelm such attempts. Aged 22, this and several other unorthodox inhibitions were traced to being on the autistic spectrum. He then decided to turn this into a book. He was born and lives in Northumberland.

What's New On The Bookshelf?

Hello Saturday!

By **Katherine Zoratti**

One mom shares the uplifting message that everyone deserves to be heard.

Hello Saturday! is a heartfelt story about two brothers living their typical lives in an atypical world. The book celebrates the power of inclusion, empathy, and understanding, reminding readers that communication comes in many different forms.

Representing kids who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices to communicate, this story allows the reader to experience a regular day navigating life in a society unfamiliar with nonverbal people.

Seeing the world through their eyes and gaining visibility into the challenges they encounter, this book shows that not everyone communicates with their voice. Yet, we all have something to say, ideas to express, and feelings to be heard.

Written for all families, Hello Saturday! opens the door to conversations about acceptance, diversity, and the many ways we share our thoughts and feelings. It gently challenges readers to look beyond words and see communication in all its beautiful forms through the use of AAC devices, expressions, and of course, love.

In a world that often overlooks or misunderstands people who have low communication or communicate differently, the story reminds us that true inclusion begins with awareness, curiosity, advocacy, and a willingness to listen with our hearts and our minds.

Everyone deserves the chance to be heard, understood, and valued for who they are. The world needs more people who can communicate with their voice to advocate for those who can't and give them an opportunity to be heard.

HELLO SATURDAY!
JUST TWO BOYS LIVING IN AN ATYPICAL WORLD
A heartfelt children's book that explores the power of inclusion and understanding of kids who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices.
www.nonverbalkids.com
Scan here to buy the book!
SCAN THE QR CODE TO BUY TODAY

With warm, inviting, and expressive illustrations and a universal message, Hello Saturday! is more than just a children's book; it's an invitation to build bridges of understanding. Whether read at home, in classrooms, or shared in community spaces, Hello Saturday! inspires children and adults alike to embrace inclusion and celebrate differences.

Blending heart, honesty, and hope, Hello Saturday! reminds us that kindness can transform an ordinary day into an extraordinary connection.

Purchase your book today:
https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0FJN14NJD/

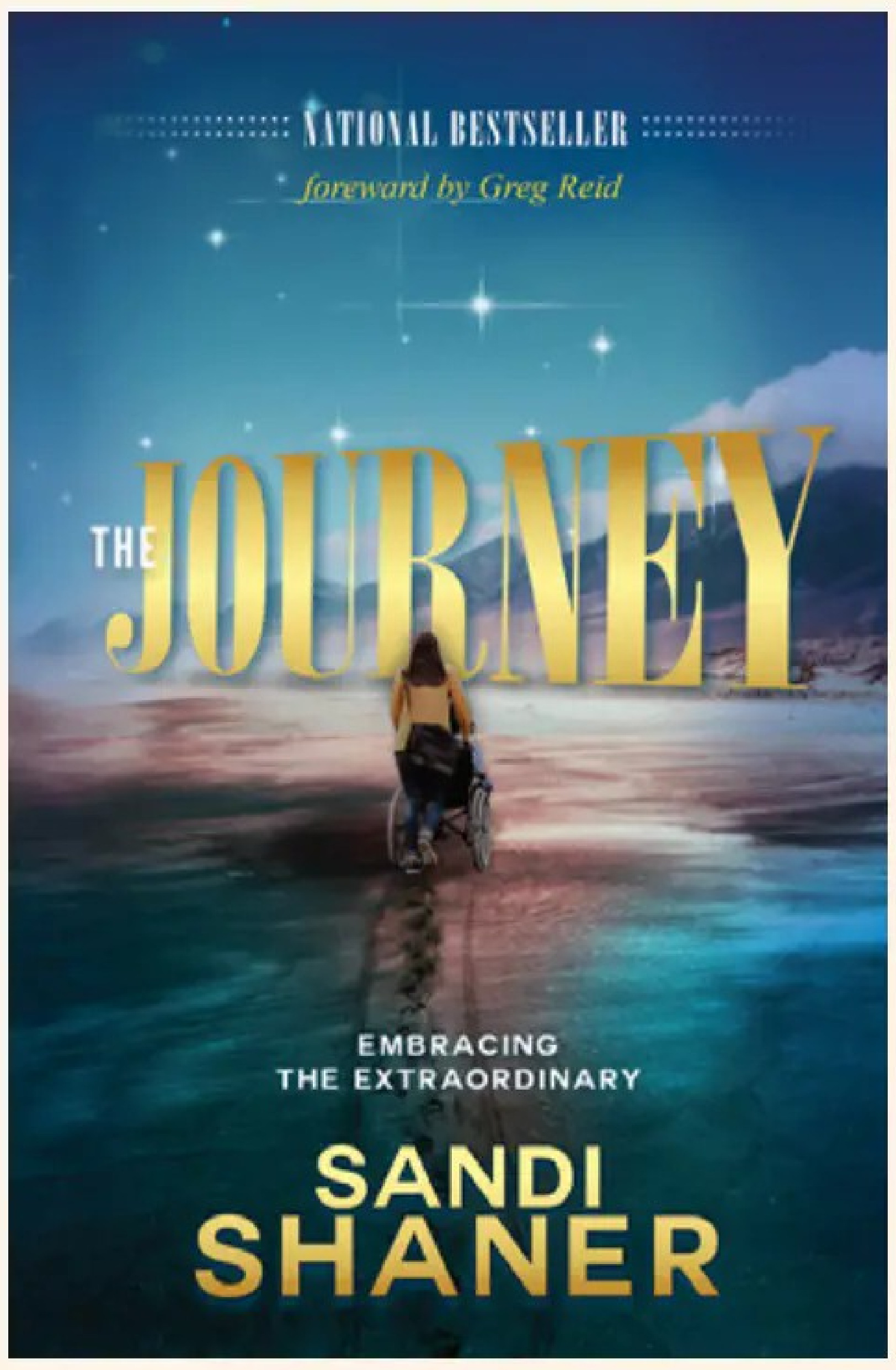
Katherine Zoratti, a seasoned marketing professional and devoted mother to two boys, one neurotypical and one neurodiverse, draws inspiration from her own family's experiences. The story is told from the perspective of Katherine and her family. Through their daily routines, conversations, and adventures, she has witnessed the contrast in how the world perceives and responds to each of her sons. These honest, sometimes tender, and often eye-opening moments inspired Hello Saturday! A story told through the lens of love, curiosity, and real-life connection. Visit www.nonverbalkids.com to see book interactions and learn more about or interact with the author.

What's New On The Bookshelf?

The Journey: Embracing the Extraordinary

By **Sandi Shaner**

A story of resilience, transformation, and the unshakeable power of a mother's love.



The Journey: Embracing the Extraordinary is a blend of lived experience, hard-won insight, and compassionate guidance for families navigating the world of special needs parenting. Being a special needs parent changes everything!

But what if the key to thriving isn't found in the treatments made available to us, but in the spaces in between?

Written by Sandi Shaner, this book is far more than a story of survival. It is a testimony of resilience, transformation, and the unshakeable power of a mother's love.

When Sandi's daughter Carly was born with a cleft lip and palate, followed by a cascade of life-altering diagnoses (including autism, epilepsy, intellectual disability, scoliosis, and a rare genetic mutation - DDX3X), her world was turned upside down.

Over 15 years, she has received 15 diagnoses, but not once has she been given an action plan that made sense. What began in quiet denial soon transformed into a fierce and unwavering fight for her daughter's survival, dignity, and quality of life.

Through surgeries, setbacks, seizures, and sleepless nights, Sandi discovers her true calling. To be a fierce advocate for her child and a voice for thousands of other families silently navigating the same road.

What makes this book a must-read is the dynamic storytelling and the contribution of several other parents who share their strength and unfiltered emotional depth. Shaner empowers you to understand your child's diagnoses, to face a medical system that overlooks the emotional needs of parents, and to rebuild hope from the ground up.

The Journey serves as a powerful reminder that even in the darkest moments, there is a path forward. It offers practical insights, spiritual reflection, and an approach to family well-being that can benefit thousands of others.

Ordinary people find the strength to do extraordinary things. All you have to do is step outside of the box and be ready to act. Prepare to cry, reflect, and be inspired to do just that.

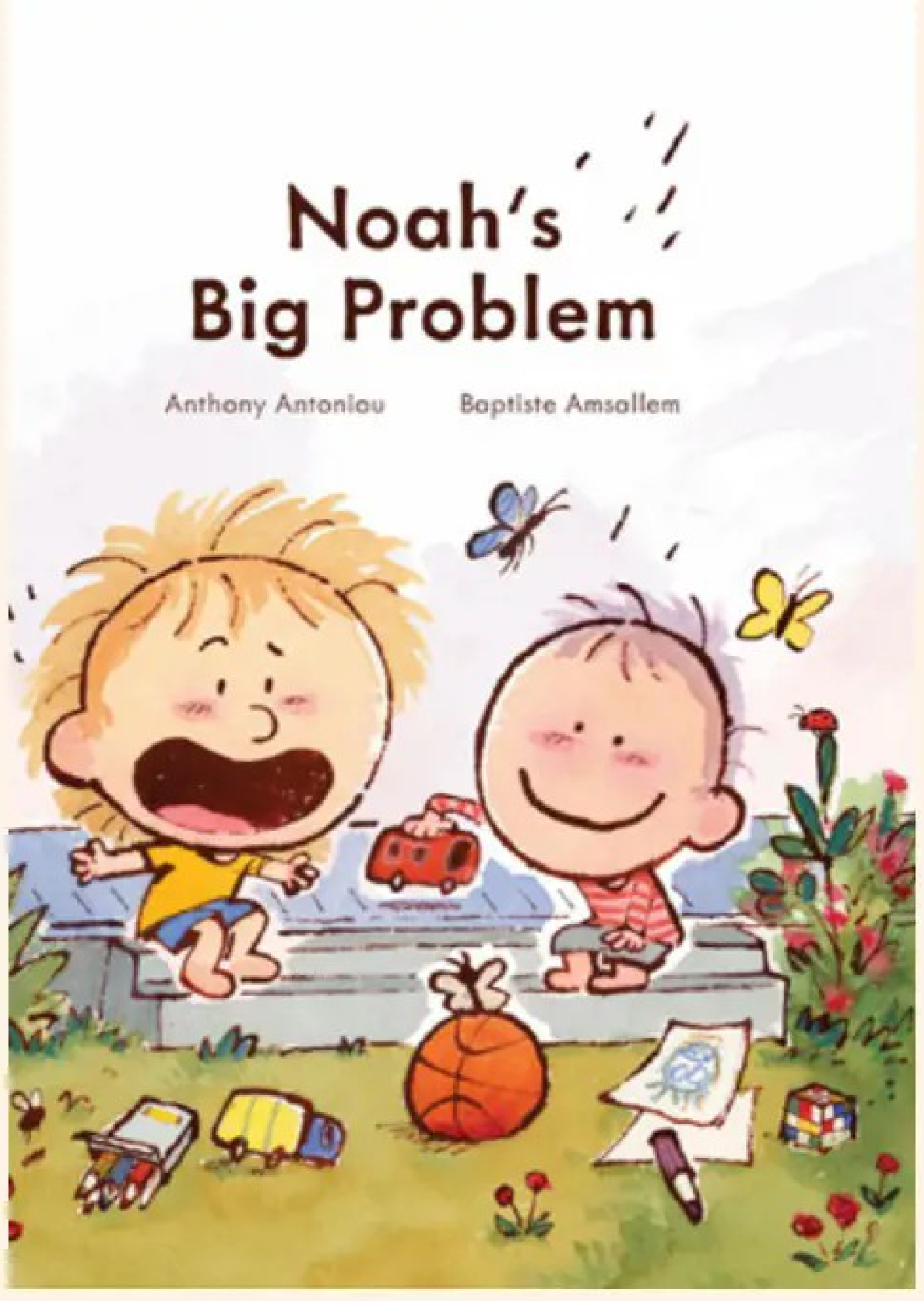
https://SandiShaner.com

Sandi Shaner is a seasoned professional with an impressive blend of experience in nonprofit leadership, corporate development, and academic achievement. Sandi's professional journey began in the corporate world, where she excelled in event management, sales, and business development. Beyond her professional achievements, Sandi has pursued academic excellence with a passion for leadership, psychology, and education. Sandi earned her master's degree in psychology at Arizona State University and is currently a doctoral student at the University of Southern California.

What's New
On The Bookshelf?

Noah's Big Problem:
A Heartwarming Story of Sibling Bonding and Neurodiversity

By **Anthony Antoniou;** Illustrated by **Baptiste Amsallem**



A story that captures the essence of the sibling relationship between two brothers.

When it comes to stories that touch both the heart and the mind, Noah's Big Problem stands out as a tender and insightful picture book about love, patience, and the beautiful complexity of family life.

Noah loves spending time with his little brother, Gabriel. But there's one challenge: Gabriel is autistic, and finding ways to play together isn't always easy. Through moments of frustration and joy, Noah learns how to connect with his brother in ways that respect their differences while celebrating what makes each of them unique.

What makes this story especially moving is that it was written by Anthony Antoniou when he was just 14 years old. Drawing from his own relationship with his autistic younger brother, Constantine, Anthony poured his personal experience into the book, capturing the ups and downs of sibling bonding with rare authenticity and heart.

Even Temple Grandin, world-renowned author, animal scientist, and autism advocate, shared her admiration for the book after reading an advance copy: "The important lesson that your book teaches is to find something the autistic child can do well. I got friends through shared interests. Basketball is a good example of a shared activity that the autistic child can have fun doing with another child."

With gentle humor and vibrant illustrations by Baptiste Amsallem, Noah's Big Problem is more than a story—it's a celebration of understanding, empathy, and the everyday triumphs that come from embracing neurodiversity. It's the perfect read for families, classrooms, and anyone looking for meaningful autism books for kids.

Published by CrackBoom! Books, a division of Papp International.

Amazon: https://a.co/d/6l3AxLG

Anthony Antoniou was born and raised in Montreal, Canada, and grew up speaking three languages. He played competitive hockey while attending Lower Canada College. He wrote Noah's Big Problem during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, when the world felt paused. A moment that gave him time to reflect on his relationship with his brother and to craft a story that would speak to children everywhere.

Today, Anthony is pursuing pre-medical studies at St. George's University in Grenada, where he continues to be inspired by his brother's unique way of seeing the world. His hope is simple yet profound: that Noah's Big Problem will help children understand, accept, and celebrate differences, and remind readers that every challenge can become a bridge to connection.

Originally written in English, Noah's Big Problem was published in French in 2023, expanding its reach to even more readers who will undoubtedly see a bit of themselves, their siblings, and their families in Noah and Gabriel's world.